



川口士  
Illustration よし☆ヲ

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This page was created before the updated (July 19, 2015) MTL guidelines and has not been reviewed.

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王麻子と魔弾の魔女  
ヴァナナディルス



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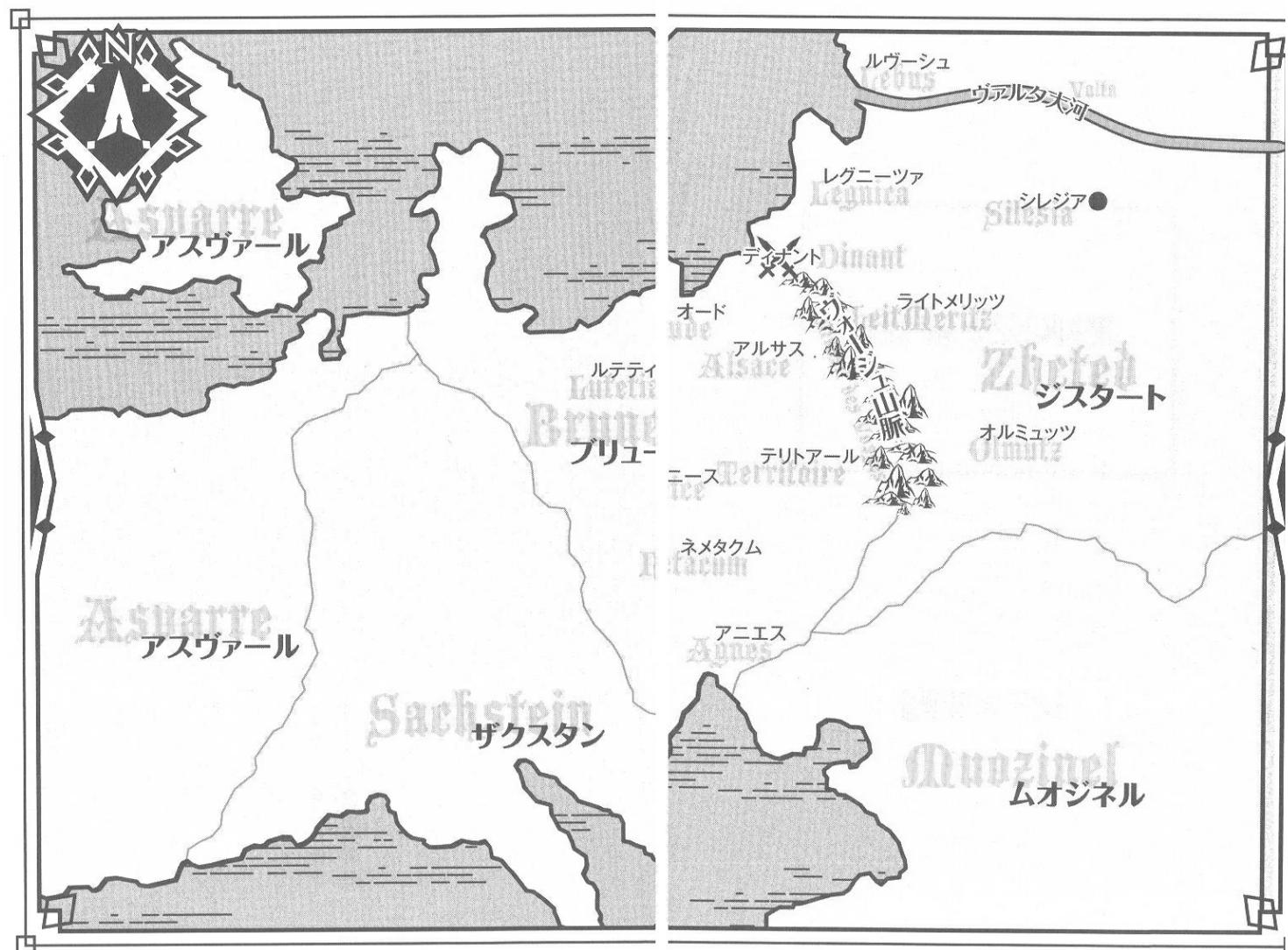
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# Chapter 1 - March of the Dragons

In Ormea Plains, in the lands where the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] and Muozinel Army clashed, four days travel to the north was Perucche Fortress. It was built in a place where a highway leading north to south intersected with a highway moving east to west-a strategic location.

The number of soldiers defending the castle there numbered around four thousand.

Many soldiers and horses bearing arms surrounded the castle, staying within countless tents.

Under the gray winter sky nearing dawn, many soldiers could be seen walking about. They were being neither bold nor flashy. Some were wearing iron armor that left no gaps in their defenses. Others wore fur, and yet others wore heavy clothes to withstand the winter cold.

Some tents were worn out, frayed in a variety of places, while other tents looked regal, as if fit for royalty. They were all mixed together.

They all belonged to the Silver Meteor Army. With that said, its configuration was quite chaotic. There were various Knighthoods, whose duties were to protect the nobles and people of Brune from the armies of other nations.

Commanding this rag-tag group was a 16 year old man.

His name was Tigrevurmud Vorn. Those close to him called him Tigre.

In a room in the inner areas of the fortress, Tigre was working hard, surrounded by an array of documents. Beside him was the close friend of his late father, Massas Rodant, who had just turned 55 this year. He was an old Earl who had taken care of Tigre in a number of ways.

“Is it morning already...?”

The warble of a crow could be heard from beyond the open window. Tigre spoke to himself with an exhausted voice. Having worked for two days straight, he was approaching his limit. His dull red hair was disordered from his habit of running his hand through it. Dark circles were faintly visible under his eyes.

“Tigre. You should sleep until the war council later today.”

Massas, who had been helping him, could no longer endure and spoke up. Tigre, without pretense, stood up sleepily and rubbed his eyelids.

“I'll accept your kind offer. Will you be fine, Lord Massas?”

“I took a nap last night. I'll rest after I put this in order a little more.”

After the invading Muozinel Army retreated, many aristocrats offered to cooperate with their private armies, and many merchants proposed a variety of transactions. Along with the interviews, negotiations, and reorganization of the soldiers, there was a fair amount of paperwork required for him to go through.

Besides the aid of Massas, who was present now, Tigre would have broken down from overwork long ago if Limlisha and Gerard were not there to help.

Tigre began to stagger out of the office when Massas called him back.

“Sorry, Tigre. When you head to your room, can you wake up Miss Lurie?”

Miss Lurie referred to Ludmira Lurie from the Kingdom of Zhcted. Her nickname was Mira.

When fighting against the Muozinel Army, she had helped lead the soldiers following Tigre. Mira, who had accompanied the Unstoppable Silver Flow [Silver Meteor Army], was given a guest room in the fortress.

Tigre looked back at the old Earl with a dubious face.

“What do you need her for?”

“I wanted to talk to her about the arrangement of the tents. I almost forgot.”

Many tents and horses surrounded the fortress of Perucche, but they were not allowed entry into the castle. Amongst them were aristocrats at odds with each other. Furthermore, there were soldiers of Zhcted as well.

Having so many people with poor relations with one another in close

proximity would inevitably lead to trouble. Thus far, Tigre and the others did their best to arrange them to avoid such an outcome.

*-- I guess there's no other way...*

Pushing aside the sleepiness attacking him, Tigre left the office understanding what Massas wanted. Tigre wanted to find someone else to take his place, but Mira was a guest, and furthermore, a girl. Unless he had pressing business, he did not wish to leave this duty to others.

*-- I've left Teita to take care of all matters dealing with Regin.*

He did not want to give even more duties to the chestnut brown-haired maid.

*-- It's out of the question to ask Ellen, and if I ask Lim, I'd be afraid of what Ellen might do later...*

Mira's room was on the way to his own, which is why Massas asked him.

He waved at the soldiers standing guard in response to their salutes. In this castle fort, Leonard, the leader of the Perucche Knights, increased the number of guards on patrol due to the increase in people roaming about.

When he arrived at Mira's room, he saw a Zhcted soldier standing guard before her door.

"I shall tell her you have arrived."

The soldier spoke, as if waiting for him. He called out from the door, reporting Tigre's arrival. A blunt voice told him to enter. While confused, Tigre stepped through the open doorway.

It was still night, just before dawn, and the room was still dark. He could vaguely see a bed toward the back. There appeared to be someone moving around it.

"I apologize for coming so early in the morning, but may I enter?"

"Naturally. Even for trivial matters, you would not simply speak to them from the hallway. You are not the type to have others deliver your messages, either."

It was as she said. Tigre approached the bed. After his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, he began to recognize the appearance of the blue-

haired Vanadis.

Tigre opened his eyes wide in surprise, standing rooted to the spot. His drowsiness was blown away.

Mira sat up on the bed wearing her thin nightclothes. Her slim neck, gently sloping shoulders, even her bosom were lightly exposed.

Mira's body was small compared to Ellen, however her breasts shook slightly with her breathing. The blankets covering her below the waist strangely made her figure visible.

“What is it?”

Mira asked curiously as she looked up at Tigre. After calming down a little, Tigre noticed she spoke in a slightly teasing nature. Tigre could not help but look away unnaturally.

“Are, aren't you cold?”

“No need to worry. I have Lavia here.”

Picking up the short spear leaning against her bed, Mira stroked the tip lovingly. The spear let out small crystals of ice, giving the room a mystical atmosphere.

The Frozen Wave was a weapon whose possession was permitted only to the Vanadis. It was a <sup>Viralt</sup> Dragonic Tool with the power to manipulate the cold.

“But if I do indeed look so cold, would you care to warm me up?”

Tigre understood she was bantering with him, so he retorted while looking away.

“If I said yes, would you let me sleep here?”

It was half his real intention. He was in a mental state where he simply wanted to sleep soundly in bed until midday.

“I do not mind. Just the other day we slept together.”

She responded immediately with a smile. Tigre gave in and rapidly apologized before stating his business. She listened to him seriously and said she would meet with Massas later to deal with the problem.

"Thank you for the hard work. Well, sweet dreams, Tigre."

After saying good night in return, Tigre turned his back to Mira. Perhaps because she had just awoken, her face was innocent. The image of her smile, bosom, and thighs were imprinted in his eyes.

"By the way, Tigre."

Tigre was surprised from being called to a stop. Though inevitable, he had seen her in her nightgown. He turned around while waiting for her to say something about it, but she spoke words beyond his expectations.

"I have heard from the soldiers that a ghost has recently come to the fortress these days."

Tigre frowned after hearing such unexpected words. He had seen many things when hunting in the mountains and forests, but he had not once found something without a reasonable explanation.

However, it was unexpected such a rumor would come about in a fortress full of people.

"It seems to be a ghost of a woman wearing a white dress, though I have seen nothing."

Tigre tilted his head curiously.

There were five women in the castle: Ellen, Lim, Teita, Mira, and Regin. Of course, none wore a white dress.

*--- Did they employ a woman from a nearby village or town and make a mistake? These stories do exist, and there are more workers taking care of chores with the arrival of more people. Even the people from Alsace alone is a lot.*

"Thank you. I will investigate this matter."

After thanking Mira, Tigre left her room.

After he quietly closed the door, Mira calmly looked away.

*--- He really is a dull man. Still, I wonder if I was a bit too bold...*

The Vanadis of blue hair tried to test Tigre's reaction with her appearance.

She had confirmed her distance from him as well as the distance between him and Ellen.

Though she was dissatisfied, she did not have anything to complain about. She was fine with how things were at the moment.

While thinking about what to do in the future, Mira began changing her clothes to clear up the matter Tigre asked her to.

By the time he returned to his room, Mira's image had disappeared from Tigre's head. His drowsiness drove the cold of dawn and the thoughts running through his head away.

After changing his clothes and removing his shoes, he got into bed and covered himself in a blanket. He fell asleep immediately.

In just a half koku, smoke began rising from the fort as cooks began making meals and the noise increased as soldiers ran about their business.

Tigre continued to sleep soundly.

Suddenly, something appeared next to Tigre. Ripples appeared, as if space was distorted.

Tigre did not wake up, and the soldiers keeping watch outside the room did not notice it at all.

From the distorted space, a white figure emerged without warning. Its contours and colors gradually took form from the shadow until a person could be seen.

It was a woman of about 20 years. She had a vivid white rose in her long, black hair with a shade of blue. A dress delicately wrapped about her body, her bosom covered in a crimson fabric, and a purple rose hung from her waist. Her face had a kind smile, exuding a lovely, delicate impression.

However, the item grasped in her hand gave off a completely different image.

It was a large scythe. Its long, curved blade was jet black and crimson. It gave off a mysterious and dreadful atmosphere and was as large as a Dragon's claw.

Such a large weapon was disproportionate to the delicate girl, but when

grasped in her hand, she gave off an appearance as if she had come out of a fantasy.

Her dress fluttered softly, and, like a fairy dancing in the wind, she landed gently. Even when her shoes adorned with red roses contacted with the floor, there was no sound elicited.

She took one step, two steps, her pure smile still on her face. Even when standing before Tigre's bed, he did not wake up.

No matter how tired he was, he would wake up immediately with any signs of excitement or hostility, and he would react to any sense of insecurity. His longtime hunting instincts forged through the battlefield would immediately rouse him from his rest.

The dark-haired beauty had so perfectly erased her presence that, even with her large scythe, she did not wake Tigre up. She looked at Tigre's sleeping face.

While looking down at him, she had the urge to poke his cheek and talk to him, but if she did that, it would cause problems.

She decided to run away quietly. This fort had two Vanadis, and it would be troublesome if they found out about her.

Also, she had played around too much.

Because she had spent a number of days trying to grasp Tigre's actions, schedule, and the structure of the fortress, a rumor of the ghost of a woman in a white dress was circulating. She had achieved her goal of seeing the face of Tigrevurmud Vorn up close.

"Just why are those two so interested in this man..."

Tigre struck her in return. He had reached out, grasping her ample bosom wrapped in a dress, with his hand.

She began to laugh involuntarily. Though she had left him alone and was certain he was asleep, he had still touched her chest.

"--- If you were awake, this crime of lese majeste would be punishable by death."

While brandishing the large scythe in her left hand, she poked Tigre with her

finger. The space between them began to distort, and, in the same manner as she had appeared, her figure faded and her colors became pale.

After a moment, her figure disappeared without leaving a single trace of her presence.

Tigre had not noticed at all and remained asleep until midday.



The clouds gradually scattered as the sun was rising, weakly illuminating the winter earth.

It was still a little too early to call it daytime. Two young girls, both about 16 or 17 years old. They both wore a military uniform. One had a sword at her waist while the other had a spear in her arms.

The spear was held by Mira, and she was a Vanadis of Zhcted Kingdom like the girl holding the sword.

With silver-white hair down to her waist and bright red eyes full of energy, the woman left a strong impression on all who saw her. She was Eleanora Viltaria, and she was called Ellen by people close to her, like Tigre.

The two looked at the countless soldiers and horses outside the castle moving about the tents.

“When I see this, it feels like I've returned to Zhcted. Hopefully it will let my men relax.”

“That may be the case for you, but it has been several months since we returned to LeitMeritz. Do you think this long duration away will cause a problem soon?”

Ellen sighed in frustration while Mira smiled provocatively and spoke sarcastically.

Originally, the Vanadis knelt before and gave fealty only to the King of Zhcted. Of course, there was moderate speculation and reasons present.

However, if one were to think of a single reason for their presence, it would be that Ellen and Mira were lending strength to a single young man.

Anyway, Ellen took Mira's provocation and looked down at her men sharply.

"... I'm grateful for your worries, but my subordinates are quite talented. They're not the type to be anxious about returning to LeitMeritz. What about you? Are your men crying to return to their home town?"

"... Oh my. I am quite worried about this, Eleanora. It is an essential thing in war."

Mira, who was shorter than Ellen, looked up and tilted her neck slightly. As if provoking the <sup>Silvfrau</sup> [Wind Princess of the Silver Flash], the <sup>Michelia</sup>

[Snow Princess of the Frozen Wave] spoke with a thorny voice. The two had a dangerous relationship, like a wolf and a fox, ever since they met.

By the way, their voices were small enough such that only they themselves could hear each other, and their expressions were full of dignity, so those looking at them simply thought they were discussing future strategies.

That was not particularly a mistake, however. Ellen and Mira set aside their emotions and avoided a large fight. The two understood the impact it would have on morale if they openly fought one another.

"Essential to war... That's right. Certainly, you're right."

Ellen's voice suddenly lost its strength and came out weakly. Mira, who was waiting for a counterattack, was surprised. She turned around involuntarily to the Vanadis with silver-white hair.

"From what I heard, Tigre may not have survived long enough for the Knights of Brune to help him if it were not for you. Thank you, Ludmira."

Mira showed signs of panic after hearing Ellen's words of gratitude, full of sincerity. While thinking about what kind of words to respond with, Ellen opened her mouth yet again.

"That's why, your work is done here. You can go home back to Olmutz and spend the rest of your life recalling these good memories while drinking your favorite tea. Get going, get going."

Ellen waved her hand, as if shooing her away, while speaking in a stony voice. She did not forget to conceal her hand gesture from the soldiers' gaze.

Mira's face went from one of blank surprise to one of anger.

"Y, you should know some shame! Here, I finally believed you finally had the heart of a Vanadis, and you simply trample over it with your infantile behavior!"

Mira shouted at Ellen with her voice as subdued as possible. Ellen also quietly spoke indignantly.

"I should say those words to you! You should reflect on those words, though I suppose they match those childish breasts of yours! Ah~ I'm sorry you have such a small chest."

Ellen, with a calm voice and a gentle look in her red eyes, looked down at Mira's chest. Obviously, they were not as large as Ellen's.

"Are, are you sure your breasts are not larger than necessary?"

"Are you thinking clearly? This is quite different from your usual thoughts of loss and gain."

Ellen laughed while shrugging. Mira turned red, the Vanadis with blue hair embarrassed that she was seen through. She quickly thought of twenty, thirty words of abuse, but she quickly forced them down. She could not carelessly speak them aloud.

Ellen and Mira were both close with the Vanadis Sophia Obertas. She was the owner of more ample bosoms than Ellen, and if she carelessly spoke, it was possible something unnecessary might be said to her.

"By the way... Tigre hasn't made a move yet."

As she looked at the smoke of food being cooked rise from around the tents of the countless soldiers and horses, Mira awkwardly changed the subject. Ellen, also collecting herself, responded seriously.

"It's about time. Lim just went to check on him a bit ago... If possible, I'd like to let that guy laze about as he wants every once in a while."

Mira's blue pupils showed signs of her surprise. She moved her head slightly and looked up at Ellen. The Vanadis with silver-white hair looked apologetic and

unusually gentle.

Though Ellen was sincerely worried about the young man with dull red hair, she was irritated that she was hardly able to alleviate his heavy burdens.

Mira began to comfort her but swallowed her words.

A man and woman approached them. Ellen looked over and smiled as she lightly waved at Tigre.

The man with dull red hair showed no signs of fatigue. He was wearing leather armor and hempen clothes which gave him a simple appearance. In his left hand was his jet-black bow, and a quiver was at his waist.

The girl accompanying him was Limlisha, Ellen's adjutant. Her nickname was Lim, and she was 19 years old, three years Tigre's senior. She had her hair tied up on the left side of her head, but because she was tall, she still retained her sense of balance. Her eyes and face were unfriendly, and she was quiet, though in a manner different from Mira.

Lim saw the face of her Lord and bowed without changing her expression. She then bowed politely to Mira who was standing next to her.

“You've worked hard, Lim.”

After giving her stiff adjutant words of appreciation, Ellen looked at Tigre with a smile.

“How are you? Did you get some sleep?”

“Yeah. Lim also made some soup, so I'm wide awake.”

Ellen looked at her adjutant in curiosity. Lim looked toward the floor and responded quickly.

“Because the war council would begin soon, I thought he should wake up as quickly as possible... It would not look good if he were yawning like he did yesterday.”

Both the first half and the latter half of her dialogue were spoken somewhat unnaturally. In the middle of their meeting yesterday, it was true Tigre had done this, but the way she spoke seemed odd.

“Soup, is it? How nice. I'll have to prepare some for Tigre next time.”

Ellen smiled and spoke jokingly as she cut Lim's words short. Lim looked back up, expressionless as usual.

“Eleanora-sama, rumors would appear if you were to do such a thing. Please leave such tasks to me.”

“I see, how regrettable. But Lim, even if you want him to eat your soup that much, remember your main duties are to deal with our subordinates.”

“Th, that...”

Lim's expression broke slightly when she noticed she was being teased. Her cheeks were slightly tinged red.

“You can cook soup, Ellen?”

Tigre asked this of the silver-white haired Vanadis both in curiosity and to help Lim. Ellen puffed out her chest and responded with pride.

“I used to do it all the time in the old days. Though it's a bit flat, I can guarantee its flavor.”

“Tigre. Soup is not bad, but what of tea? It has such an elegant taste and smell...”

“You don't understand Tigre at all. It's best to give Tigre something simple and familiar first thing in the morning.”

Ellen brushed off Mira's words with a laugh. Mira, rather than backing down, retorted with an aggressive appearance.

“If you wish to say that much, then we should have Tigre compare your crude soup with my tea. He can just have whichever he finds most delicious from now on.”

“Fine. Tigre and I have made meals plenty of times. Against someone who has no experience in the kitchen, I won't lose.”

Unable to respond to Ellen's words, Mira frowned and sunk into silence. It was true she was not used to working in the kitchen. Tigre and Lim simply looked at each other.

“... What should we do about this?”

Lim was Tigre's reliable teacher and knew many things he did not. His teacher, three years his senior, had a face full of distress, her voice clearly strained.

“Please endure for now. Put this aside for as long as you can. Lord Tigrevurmud, you are busy, so make do with what you have, and if these two make you drink whatever it is they may make... Please withhold your answer to avoid harming their feelings.”

“So avoid giving them victory or defeat, is it?”

“Though I would like Eleanora-sama to win, this is not the time for such a trivial game of skill. Ideally, this can be done after everything has been settled.”

Though she had no way of telling how serious Mira was, she clearly knew Ellen was, and if she were being serious, victory or defeat would have a major impact on any and all future battles. Though Lim did not dare to put this into words, Tigre understood.

“--- I understand. Though I think it unfair not to give them an answer, I'll let it be for now.”

Lim sighed as she looked to her side at the Vanadis with silver-white hair. Though Ellen was confident, she had no basis for her confidence.

*--- Like I thought, it must be something about Lord Tigrevurmud...*

Lim shook her head as she began thinking. Her thoughts would stray elsewhere if she started.

Compared to winning the war, deciding between their soup and tea was an impossible task.

Tigre was a small aristocrat in the Kingdom of Brune.

To be accurate, he used to be. He was accused of leading the troops from Zhcted, the neighboring country, into his lands. Tigre was deprived of his title and his lands.

However, Tigre did not waver. He had a reason for doing this.

It started in Dinant at the beginning of autumn. The Brune Army was at war with the Zhcted Army. Tigre fought Ellen and was defeated, becoming her captive.

In order to get him back, it was necessary to pay a ransom; however, there were no signs of one being prepared. If nothing happened, Tigre would have been sold away.

In his absence, Duke Thenardier sent his troops to Alsace. Tigre learned of this.

Tigre borrowed the strength of Ellen and her soldiers to defend Alsace, the lands he governed, from Duke Thenardier's troops. During that conflict, Tigre killed Zaien, the eldest child of the Duke, who was the Commander. It was a necessary fight.

*--- That's right. Not even half a year has passed...*

While walking along the ramparts of Perucche Castle, Tigre thought of everything that happened until then. While he had been fighting for less than six months, it was a time full of blood, far more dense than any of the other sixteen years of his life.

The territory he ruled was full of mountains and forests and had a few hundred soldiers at most.

On the other hand, Duke Thenardier was a large aristocrat who represented Brune. He could easily gather ten thousand soldiers beneath him.

Speaking normally, one would not think they would fight each other, but Duke Thenardier would not permit the man who killed his son to live. Tigre would only have the choice to flee or fall to ruin.

If he chose either, the land of Alsace where he was born and raised would be overrun.

However, Tigre had gathered the power necessary to face the Duke.

When winter began, Muozinel, with a large army, invaded from the southeast. The nearby aristocrats and Knighthoods did not move immediately. Tigre held off the Muozinel Army of twenty thousand with little more than two

thousand.

Through a number of twists and turns, Tigre borrowed the strength of the Vanadis Ludmira, and, due to Massas and Augre's efforts, many allies were made from the nobles and Knights in the vicinity. They succeeded in pushing the Muozinel Army back once again. This happened just a few days ago.

"This fortress guarded by the Knighthood of Perucche is a few days north from where our battle took place. Though I can't say it is uncomfortable, I would rather spend my time in the grasslands."

Emir, who commanded the Perucche Knights, ran to his aid; Tigre accepted it gratefully.

Tigre led the ~~[Unstoppable Silver Flow]~~ <sup>[Unstoppable Silver Flow]</sup> [Silver Meteor Army], the Zhcted Army, and the various aristocrats cooperated with him to visit Perucche fortress.



In a room deep inside the castle, six people sat around a table.

They were Tigre, Ellen, Lim, Mira, and Massas.

The sixth person had golden hair cut to an even length to her shoulders and clear azure eyes. She had neat features and appeared slightly tense. She felt a little unreliable compared to the other women.

Her name was Regin. She was raised as a Prince named Regnas; she was the Princess of Brune.

However, the people who knew she was a Princess were few in number. It would be a source of trouble for the ~~[Unstoppable Silver Flow]~~ <sup>[Unstoppable Silver Flow]</sup> [Silver Meteor Army].

"--- The troops have prepared for departure. We can leave tomorrow if you are so inclined."

Massas, with his stout body wrapped in cloth, solemnly reported as he looked at everyone. This old Knight acted as a mediator to the aristocrats and Knights who recently offered their cooperation to Tigre.

To be accurate, there was no other option. The army was made in haste. There were Knights and aristocrats who stood up in this chaotic state, calling for movement against Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon due to their displeasure with the current situation.

Those against Thenardier and Ganelon were cooperating with Tigre because they could not support the large aristocrats. Though they had offered their services, they followed Tigre because of their mistreatment.

Furthermore, there were not only Brune citizens but members from Zhcted in the encampment, divided into the LeitMeritz Army led by Ellen and the Olmutz Army led by Ludmira.

Standing above them all was a young 16 year old man. Until as recent as six months ago, he was an Earl of a distant territory who led one hundred men at the most.

There were people beside Massas who praised Tigre's individual ability and courage and followed after him. Viscount Augre and Auguste of the Calvados Knights, as well as Shaie of the Lutece Knights, Emir and the leader of the Perucche Knights, Leonard did as well.

However, there were still too few people.

It was because of Massas' dignity and insight that the Silver Meteor Army had yet to collapse.

“How many soldiers?”

“We have four thousand Knights from Brune. With the Zhcted Army, we have an additional six thousand infantry and three thousand cavalry.”

Massas responded to Regin's question politely, unable to remove his attitude as a retainer.

Hearing the numbers from the old Earl, Ellen threw a questioning look to Mira. The three thousand cavalry came from the LeitMeritz Army alone.

“Three hundred of my men have returned to Olmutz. We were not originally prepared for a long-term expedition.”

Mira answered as if it were natural. Ellen frowned; the three hundred that

returned were acting more as Mira's bodyguards, originally.

"It would be nice if you went home as well."

Ellen laughed bitterly, her mouth smiling sarcastically.

"That would be impossible. I am here as an inspector, after all."

"I don't recall asking for one."

Though Ellen retorted in disappointment, she continued to frown and fold her arms. Unable to comprehend the two, Tigre looked to Lim for help. She quietly looked back at him.

"Eleanora-sama, when you report to His Majesty on the progress of this war, any lies or misconduct will be pointed out by an inspector. Because it is well known you are on poor terms with Ludmira-sama, she is the perfect person for this position."

"Is it really that big a problem?"

"There have been examples in the past where inspectors who were intimate with the person in question were accused of lying."

To be more concrete, there was an example of embezzling war funds. Should the Commander win the inspector over, he could split the profits in return for a favorable evaluation. It was not unusual to think such things might happen, so an individual typically not on good relations with the person in question was chosen.

Tigre seemed convinced. Regin, to his right, looked doubtful.

"So in total, we have thirteen thousand... There seem to be more soldiers in this castle, though."

Massas nodded to the Princess in light surprise.

"It is as Her Highness says. If we include the soldiers in this fortress and exclude Lord Ludmira's men, there is a total of seventeen thousand; however, considering those required to defend the castle and accounting for food, fuel, armor, and a variety of supplies, we cannot take them all."

"Indeed... I understand. Please continue."

Massas unrolled a map of Brune on the table.

“Even if we give the word to leave, it will take at least seven days before we can actually depart from this fortress.”

“There are two reasons.”

Lim opened her mouth in response to Massas' words.

“The first reason is due to the battle between Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon. According to our information, they began fighting near the capital, but Duke Thenardier was forced to retreat many times. At present, they are near Nemetacum.”

“Who is leading their armies? Who are acting as their eyes?”

Ellen asked from the side as Lim was pointing to the map. Massas stroked his beard and shook his head.

“A man called Steid is commanding Duke Thenardier's Army, and he is a close aide. Marquis Greast is commanding Duke Ganelon's Army. He is also very close to Lord Ganelon.”

“Greast... That man.”

Tigre and Ellen recalled the man from memory. Before their battles with the Black Knight Roland, he appeared on behalf of Ganelon.

Ellen in particular had a sharp expression.

“He seems quite carefree with Muozinel Army attacking, or did Duke Ganelon know this and move his soldiers then?”

A cold emotion was visible in Mira's blue eyes. Massas nodded in assent.

“That is most likely. The Muozinel Army moved its troops by land and by sea. Tigre... Earl Vorn repulsed their ground troops while Duke Thenardier fought off their navy.”

“Duke Thenardier's influence is spread throughout the southern part of Brune, centered around Nemetacum. Duke Ganelon decided to make a large move, attacking what remained from Muozinel's invasion. He was exploiting that.”

Tigre had mixed feelings hearing Lim and Massas' explanation.

*--- I unwittingly helped Duke Thenardier...*

He had fought, and Muozinel's ground troops had retreated, but it was in no way irrelevant compared to the battle at sea. Since it was still a part of Duke Thenardier's lands, he would have fought both the forces on land and at sea.

"With the Muozinel Army gone, Thenardier will focus on Duke Ganelon's attack. There is no reason we need to appear there."

Massas pointed to the map as he spoke. It was a basic strategy to wait for the enemy to fall or to finish him off when weakened.

"The second reason?"

Lim responded to Tigre's question.

"When the Muozinel Army withdrew, they praised you, Lord Tigrevurmud. Afterward, they made your activities known to the public of Brune Kingdom."

"So the fight between Thenardier and Ganelon will prolong in the confusion with the appearance of Tigre as a third force."

Massas looked bitter. The current situation was a provocation to the old Knight.

Though Tigre had rapidly been established as a third force, it would only add to the unfavorable criticism of being a weak family of nobles who brought in the Zhcted Army for aid.

On the other hand, both Thenardier and Ganelon governed the rich lands of Nemetacum and Lutetia and had the power to mobilize many people.

Tigre could barely manage to gather ten thousand soldiers while they could find double that without much trouble.

"Could my name play a role?"

Regin asked with a slightly regretful expression. Though alive, everyone thought she had died in the battle at Dinant, and outside the people present, only a few knew she was actually a woman. Though she lived as the Prince, she was a woman.

"Though we have a plan for that, we decided not to use it."

Ellen spoke as if it were a trivial issue. Regin asked her more out of curiosity.

"I thought you wished to let others know a member of the Royal Family was with you."

When it was revealed that the method to prove Regin was a Princess was in Artishem, it was Ellen who brought up the idea of spreading the knowledge.

"It's too naïve a plan."

She responded curtly with disappointment. Regin frowned in embarrassment and turned to Tigre for help. Seeing that, Massas cleared his throat.

"If I may be so presumptuous as to explain---"

"Lord Massas, allow me to explain."

Interrupting the old Earl's words, Tigre turned to Regin with a bright expression. Though it was unpleasant, he felt it necessary to explain with his own logic.

"Since the Muozinel Army retreated, ever since we came to this fortress from Ormea Plains... I have spoken to many of the aristocrats, Knights, and merchants."

Being careful to not demean himself, Tigre continued his words.

"Many have their reasons for coming to this fortress. Some recognized my fight against the Muozinel Army, and others came to fight for my cause. Even so, I understand... I have yet to earn their trust."

"Trust...?"

Regin looked at him with her blue eyes.

"I brought the Zhcted Army within the country and have been stripped of my title. There are many who wish to see what kind of person I am."

At first, Tigre did not realize this, but after speaking to Lim and Massas, he began to choose his words carefully.

"If I announced to them in this situation that I would like to go to Artishem, they would be suspicious. They would not follow my lead."

As Ellen had said, it was a naïve plan.

The strategy they had considered was as follows.

First, they would publicly announce Regin's presence and move toward Artishem. Naturally, Ganelon and Thenardier would temporarily ally themselves and move their soldiers forward in order to silence Regin.

Though the two would ally, they were initially at odds with one another. They would have problems and, even if their combined army was two, or three times the strength, they could take advantage of the disorganization.

However, the strategy had the major premise that they allied with one another.

It also depended on the aristocrats and Knighthoods not having ulterior motives and trusting Tigre, even with any potential speculation.

However, the current situation was not like that.

If the one who betrayed his country and brought in the Zhcted Army into his country were to claim the deceased Prince was with him, it would only look like he brought in a girl with a similar appearance...

This gossip would run rampant in the military and would only drive their will to fight away.

“Given our situation, it is best we save your name for a later time.”

“... Later time?”

Though Regin looked downcast in sorrow, she looked up upon hearing Tigre's words.

“When we emerge victorious. To make it a more positive thing, we will use Your Highness' name.”

Regin looked at the face of the young man for a while and sat down like a child.

“I understand. I was relying on you in the first place, so I will leave the decision to you.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. However – though it may be contradictory for me

to say this now – It could be possible... we may need to claim that that we are [Protecting a Woman from the Royal Family] sooner..."

Should Thenardier and Ganelon learn of Regin, they may claim [Tigrevurmud Vorn has given shelter to a certain member of the Royal Family and has concealed it for his own self-interests]. If that is exposed, no matter what excuse he might give, it would not be accepted.

"We cannot just hide it, but it is dangerous to conceal it as well. It is a difficult situation..."

"I will do my best so harm does not befall you."

Massas looked at Tigre with concern as he smiled toward the Princess so she would not worry. It was clear he would not expose the Princess, but there was another reason Tigre did not tell her.

Regin was a powerful weapon.

*-- She is actually a Princess, yet she has lived as the Prince until now. That alone is enough to shake the people...*

Her name would have the powerful ability to gain political or military powers, and they could use it to show Thenardier and Ganelon's lack of loyalty.

For example, if Roland's assassination by Ganelon was known to Regin, Massas may have strongly recommended revealing her identity because it would be needed to maintain the calmness of the people afterward.

Of course, he would have done this for sure if he and Augre had been unable to successfully repel the Muozinel Army with Tigre.

So long as the allies did not fall into confusion, it would be a large advantage for them.

However, they had to use all their pieces effectively. Even the present condition was a blessing compared to what they had a few months ago.

Soon afterward, the war council ended.

To conceal Regin's position, it was necessary to limit her contact with others as much as possible.

In Perucche Castle, there were many Knights and aristocrats. Naturally, there would be people who recognized Regnas' face. If they followed their intuition, they might have discovered something upon seeing Regin.

Because of this, she stayed deep within the castle and rarely left the room provided for her, and Regin did not seem to have positive interactions with others.

With that said, she could not be left alone as the Princess of a nation. The duty to take care of her personal effects was left to Teita.

When Regin's identity was revealed to her, Teita was greatly surprised and clung to Tigre out of anxiety and tension.

"Tigre-sama... I can't handle such an important task."

"I thought you might say that. It would be difficult on you, after all. Certainly, you have had little opportunity to meet other aristocrats, let alone someone of the Royal Family."

Tigre smiled bitterly and pat the head of Teita who had stood completely stiff. The maid with chestnut hair gently watched him as he continued to speak.

"But if it's you, I don't think I need to worry much. Even if she is the Princess, in this situation, you do not need to treat her as such. Please take care of her as you have taken care of me. If there are any problems, I'll find some way to deal with it."

He hugged Teita and lightly tapped her back to ease her mind. Teita made her decision then.

In fact, there had not been any problems since they began living in the fortress. Regin was quiet and doll-like. Though she quietly asked Teita to do a few small things for her, Teita carried them out sincerely but in a way that would not bother her.

At this time, Teita was wiping Regin's body. The Princess was currently sitting naked on the carpeted floor with her back to the maid who was squeezing hot water out of the cloth in her hand.

In the room was a simple bed and a desk and chair. A candlestick was burning

to provide light. With the simplicity of the accommodations, one would not think her to be the Princess of this very country.

*-- She looks used to this...*

Teita thought a variety of things after seeing the Princess acting so calmly.

To the man on the street, a bath was a costly recreation. Usually they would squeeze hot water out of cloth and wipe their body. Teita, as a maid, took efforts to keep her body clean, but she had rarely entered a bath.

Having enough firewood to heat up enough water to fill a tub was a luxury offered at festivals which came one, two times a year.

However, there were facilities in large cities where hot water was collected and people could soak their bodies, the so called public bath house. Rich merchants and aristocrats would head there on a daily basis to cleanse themselves. Of course, such a facility would be present in the Royal Palace.

*“--- Teita... was it?”*

With her name suddenly called, Teita's shoulders shook in surprise. She tried to answer, but only a small sound left her. She made a mistake without realizing it.

While Teita was crimson and panicking, the white back of the Princess gradually began to shake. It seems she was laughing quite a lot.

“You do not need to be so surprised. I simply wished to express my gratitude to you. I apologize that I have so little to offer you for helping me today.”

“There, there is no need for such a thing...”

Teita shook her head vigorously, having heard such unthinkable words. It was not simply because of what she said, but because it was the Princess who said them; she realized it may have been impolite to refuse. While Teita was conflicted over this, Regin spoke in a quiet voice.

“I have heard you served Earl Vorn for many years.”

“Ah, yes. Um, I have served Tigre-sama since I was 11, so it has been four years now.”

“Tigre...? Come to think of it, others refer to him in such a way...”

Regin looked baffled. Teita briefly described the origin of his name. Regin listened happily as she learned Tigre shortened his name because it was troublesome otherwise.

“Do you mind telling me more about him? It does not matter if it is something trivial. I wish to know more about the person who is lending his power to me.”



Though the latter half of her words were spoken as though she was giving an excuse, Teita did not mind. She was simply happy that the Princess liked him.

“I see, that's right. Well then, three years ago...”

While Teita told the Princess stories, the two became friends.



Lutetia, which Duke Ganelon governed, was located in the northern part of Brune.

It was known for its cool climate, and apples were grown instead of grapes.

Though the wine produced in Brune was widely considered to be delicious, even in neighboring countries, cider was brewed so as not to be outdone. Its slight acidity and exquisite sweetness left a cooling sensation in the throat. Some said it was better than the wine.

Charon Anquetil Greast let out a small breath while drinking apple cider in Lutetia.

He was a man in his early twenties. The color of fatigue blurred the young noble's face, and his normally straight hair had fallen into disorder. Mud was blotted about his luxurious silk clothing.

“Though I just returned from ten days of backbreaking work on the battlefield, this feels rather rewarding on its own.”

Across the walnut table, sitting opposite to Greast was a man the size of a 14 or 15 year old child. He wore a silk hat over his bald head and fine, ornate clothing. Though his eyes were large, his eyelids were small.

The man's name was Maximilian Bennusa Ganelon. He was one of the great powers of Brune alongside Duke Thenardier.

Ganelon's residence was located in Artishem, the capital of Lutetia. It was decorated by fine furniture handcrafted by famous artisans. Even Greast could not help but let out a breath of admiration, even when he was uninterested in

such things.

Greast and Ganelon held crystal cups with jewels embedded within.

“Though I am certain it was hard, was it difficult to sleep in the carriage for so long?”

While drinking the apple cider, Ganelon smiled thinly. Greast responded with his own wry smile as he placed his cup on the table. At that moment, the smile disappeared from his face.

“So what did you want? You ordered me to return at once.”

Several days ago, Greast had reached Nemetacum in southern Brune.

Ganelon entrusted command of the troops to him. He had aggressively confronted Thenardier's troops from the vicinity of the King's Capital until he drove them back to Nemetacum.

He roughly understood Steid's, the Commander of Thenardier's Army, personality and how he would move his soldiers. He would have buried him in the next battle.

However, a messenger from Ganelon came to him while he was ordering his troops to march. He was told to [Wait for the Occasion. Have the soldiers remain on standby and return to Artishem at once, even if a single koku early].

Though Greast was given permission to lead the soldiers, and he was about to begin a pleasant campaign, in the end, he only commanded them under Ganelon's permission. Above all, it was not his place to act against orders against the Duke.

“There have been a few interesting things happening recently.”

Ganelon took a sip of the apple cider in the crystal cup before speaking once again.

“First of all, the [Bow] has been used. It seems it is currently in Tigrevurmud Vorn's possession.”

Even Greast let out a small sound of admiration.

*--- How unusual for this country. To think he would be a user of that bow...*

Greast had not seen Tigre's bow. When he was at the meeting representing Ganelon, Tigre naturally did not have his weapon. In the battle afterward, Greast had quickly left the battlefield.

*--- I had heard he repulsed the Muozinel Army to the southeast... Could that have been because of the power of the [Bow]?*

As soon as he began thinking that, Greast quickly shook the thought away.

*--- If that were so, Kreshu would not have spread word of his success. If he becomes stronger by relying on the power of his bow, he would be easy to get rid of. For now, I will withhold my judgment.*

The gray-haired Marquis knew of the [Bow] because Ganelon had taught him. Even so, he still did not have a clear picture of it.

“The second issue is... The girl has fallen into Earl Vorn's hands.”

He referred to Regin. Greast tilted his neck.

“Like I thought, we should have killed her ourselves.”

“If we made a move, Thenardier would have seen through it long ago. That man has a keen sense of smell. It is precisely because we have kept our distance that this ended without him realizing the lass is alive. Still, I must admit I played around too much.”

Ganelon brought his hand to the scruff of his neck. His attitude and voice sounded as if he had committed a trivial blunder.

The means to prove she was a Princess lay in Artishem. Regin was the daughter of King Faron. Ganelon had not killed her thinking he would have the opportunity to use her some day.

Also, Regin was an opponent Ganelon thought little of. She had little credibility, and her origins acted as a large shackle to restrict her movements. That is why he underestimated her.

The timing for Muozinel's invasion was also bad. During that time, Ganelon's subordinates lost sight of Regin.

“Really, Faron did a troublesome thing.”

Ganelon smiled bitterly as he called the King without any honorary titles. It was an unusual thing.

“Most likely, he was not going to make her succeed the throne. He was probably building her reputation up and concocted some plan to have her appear ill so she could live in the monastery. He would be able to defend the honor of his daughter and her mother.”

“So what is Earl Vorn planning to do with her?”

“He is most likely looking for an opportunity. Also, I thought you heard this on your way back, but Drekavac has sent the Dragon to Thenardier.”

He spoke, once again, without any sign of tension. Greast misinterpreted this and made a mild complaint.

“Regrettably, I was unable to see it. I have only heard rumors that it is a <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon.”

“I apologize about that. Do you have any method of killing the Dragon?”

“I'll borrow your head. Do you have an idea, Your Excellency?”

Greast did not respond eagerly as he spoke to Ganelon. The bald Duke with a small body placed his crystal cup on the table and opened his right hand. A miniature sculpture of a Dragon's head was in his palm.

“I have only heard of five – no, six Double Headed Dragons. To think one would appear here.”

A chill went down Greast's backbone as Ganelon responded with a smile. The marquis with gray hair understood the meaning of Ganelon's gesture.

He crushed the Dragon's head in his hand. Ganelon had done so in all seriousness. Greast knew well enough that Ganelon could do this easily if he had the urge to. At the same moment, Greast guessed what Ganelon had in mind for the future.

“What will you do in the future, Your Excellency?”

“I wonder what I should do. Although the situation seems like a deadlock, Thenardier has a Dragon, and Vorn has the [Bow] and the Vanadis, while I have nothing.”

"It will be your victory if you can bring the two together to fight."

It was not flattery; Greast seriously believed so. He had no confidence of winning against Thenardier and Tigre, even with more soldiers.

"Aside from Thenardier, Vorn..."

Drinking up the apple cider in his crystal cup, Ganelon shook his head. "There is a chance here. Unlike that frog who eats gold, if the [Bow] or the <sup>Viralt</sup>

Dragonic Tool is destroyed, they can't be recovered, and I do not know what Vorn plans to do right now. I would like to get the bow in my grasp--"

While pouring new cider into his crystal goblet, Ganelon continued regretfully.

"I've roughly accomplished my goals here. There is no specific reason for me to remain."

Greast finally understood. Ganelon had no interest in the throne. Though he may have had some interest in the person in question, he was simply competing with Thenardier to kill time.

"I now understand who has the [Bow]. I would like to see him, so it would be a waste if Drekavac killed him. Then again, he took care of Durandal's user. If he comes here, it would only become troublesome."

"Is there a possibility of finding a new user for Durandal?"

"As it is, it is only a large sword. I do not think anyone will come for at least another one or two years. I do not believe people from other countries can use it."

Greast understood what Ganelon was thinking.

"Burn him. I leave the command to you."

"This is like Roland. It was flashy, but had a hidden purpose."

The marquis with gray hair spoke his thoughts. Ganelon's cruel method of killing Roland using the bee prison was truly done to kill the user of Durandal.

If Roland had not been able to manipulate Durandal, Ganelon may not have killed him. Since no one realized Ganelon had killed him, it was publicized to be

a murder performed in madness.

Ganelon smiled hearing Greast's words.

"Please carry my entire fortune out of Artishem. Bring the soldiers to the south and fight Thenardier's soldiers. We will make it seem like I set fire to Artishem in my madness."

"... Do you think they will believe this?"

Greast looked doubtful. Ganelon's abnormality was known amongst the aristocrats.

"It is fine if it is only a rumor. The truth will be difficult to find if there is any reason to doubt it. Even if this city burns, Regin will come. Thenardier will learn of her existence, but he will not be able to act."

*--- Tens of thousands will face each other in the ruined city, is it?*

Greast imagined a gruesome, ugly spectacle and smiled in excitement.

"So you will hide and wait for it to end. What will happen afterward?"

"As soon as Thenardier has declared victory, we will collect the [Bow] and Durandal. If Vorn wins, then I will move to another country. Right now, perhaps Asvarre or Zhcted would be best... Well, I will think of it when the time comes."

Ganelon's attitude was akin to a child who happily looked forward to a trip.

"That's right. Let's assume there are many traps underground. I would like to see if Regin has exhausted all her luck simply by finding Vorn."

Ganelon hit his hands as if he had come up with something. Greast looked doubtful.

"Do you plan to appear then?"

"This won't take much effort. I'll do it. I wonder what will happen..."

Hearing Ganelon's thoughts, Greast looked on in dissatisfaction.

*--- It's a bad habit of his. In order to enjoy himself, he does things that lack certainty...*

However, that was very much like Ganelon. Greast planned the next steps,

one after another, after coming up with an idea.

“Incidentally---”

Greast suddenly recalled, while forming his plans, something he had forgotten.

“What will you do with King Faron?”

Greast did not call the King without his title, like Ganelon, but his tone held no respect.

“After Your Excellency leaves the King's Capital, after a number of days pass, that should take effect...”

“--- Leave it.”

Ganelon spoke as if he was talking about a broken toy.

“I have left instructions in the palace to have him drink everything, but it will be done in small amounts. As you said, it will take some time, probably around ten days... However, it is already too late. His flesh and blood aside, it has already seeped into his bones.”

A violent smile appeared on Ganelon's face.

“He will realize it when he wakes up after many days. He may think that man's motive is to crush a troublesome aristocrat. How sweet it will be.”

After emptying the crystal cup he played with, Ganelon laughed, looking at his reflection in the chalice.

“I will not allow any blade that may turn against me to remain.”



It was at the same time as when Ganelon and Greast were speaking cheerfully to each other.

In Montauban, a few days south of Artishem, Thenardier had caused a one-sided slaughter.

Montauban was a grassland which spread north of Nemetacum. Though it was very flat, there was a river and a few hills. It was a suitable place for large armies to confront one another.

Since the Thenardier Army, led by Steid, clashed with Ganelon's Army back near the King's Capital, they had continued to lose. They finally began to fight back. In these vast plains, Thenardier's twenty-five thousand strong army fought against Ganelon's army of thirty thousand people.

The Ganelon Army dispersed, having just encountered an overwhelming defeat.

The plains burst into flames in various places due to the fires vomited by the <sup>Pra</sup> Fire Drake. The grass, which was sparse in the dead of winter, was now completely burnt away. If it were spring or summer, it is possible all of Montauban would have been wrapped in flames.

Amongst the men, five small mountains moved about the land.

They were covered with scales, sharp fangs, and claws. They were large Dragons which towered over all else. Five Dragons fiercely attacked the Ganelon Army. Despite their swords and spears, the enemy was crushed.

The soldiers were turned to lumps of flesh, the ground was red and black, covered in blood and brains. The Ganelon Army had already collapsed. The tough scales of the Dragons were impervious to any blade, and a simple movement could cause a human to be crushed underfoot, bone, flesh, and all.

The horses cried in fear, and every time they were approached by a beast, they were broken and thrown about. Corpses littered the meadow.

Even the officers and men of the Thenardier Army who fought on the victorious side had chills down their spine seeing the tragic spectacle. The only ones not to move a single eyebrow were Duke Thenardier and his aide, Steid.

Felix Aaron Thenardier looked at the battle from his horse. He was tall and had broad shoulders and a thick chest. His rugged face held sharp eyes. He was a man of 42 years.

He had fought off the Muozinel Army in the sea to the south. After driving them back, he went north, stopping only to receive the Dragons from Drekavac,

and to meet up with Steid in Montauban to fight the Ganelon Army.

The war began in the winter morning and ended before day's end.

The sun had not even approached its peak. The meadow was bathed in sunlight. Innumerable corpses and massive amounts of blood littered the ground, while small flames and black smoke colored the sky.

Thenardier silently looked over the field.

In his head, the next fight had already begun.

Three thousand from Ganelon's Army were killed in battle.

One thousand were eaten by the Dragons, and one thousand more died. The final one thousand were trampled to death as their allies ran away.

Though it may seem ridiculous, it was quite close at the time. While the Dragons would eat men whole, there were already a considerable amount dead before they arrived.

When the men of the Ganelon Army saw the Dragons, they turned to retreat.

The soldiers who ran away numbered six thousand. The number who surrendered to Thenardier's Army numbered more than twenty thousand.

In comparison, the damage to the Thenardier Army was negligible. The number dead was fewer than five hundred, while the number injured was three thousand at the most.

There was a feast held on a hill to the north of Montauban to celebrate their victory. The aristocrats following Thenardier visited his tent one after another. Thenardier nodded in appreciation and then asked a question.

“--- What do you think is the cause of this upcoming war?”

There were roughly two answers.

“It is probably a result of your brilliant command.”

“Really, to think you have Dragons. I cannot believe you have such uncontrollable monsters fighting for you.”

Their praise for Thenardier was mixed with fear of the Dragons. They would

not make any unnecessary remarks before Thenardier after the five Dragons planted such a strong impression in them.

As the night grew old, the feast drew to a close. Thenardier left his tent and looked at the silver crescent moon floating in the sky, illuminating the darkness with its brilliance. He felt the lukewarm wind.

“Where are you going, Your Excellency?”

When the lookout looked at him curiously, the baffled soldier continued to speak curtly.

“I am prepared to receive punishment, your Excellency, but please refrain from careless actions.”

“Please return to your tent.”

Ignoring the soldiers looking at him, Thenardier walked away. Though many guards saw Thenardier, they could only watch him with impatience and confusion as he moved away.

After he passed through countless gazes in the encampment, after walking a short distance away, he was in an area full of soil.

It was a moat used to buy time for if a Dragon broke free. Inside were rare Dragons surrounded by double fences and many layers of earth. Rather than protecting them, they were built to protect the humans outside.

From a floating bridge crossing the moat, Steid appeared with torch in hand from the darkness. He remained expressionless as usual and carried a sword at his waist.

“What is it, Your Excellency?”

“I wish to see the Dragons.”

He answered naturally. Steid followed quickly behind Thenardier.

They passed a second moat and the fences. Thenardier and Steid advanced quickly under the light of the moon and the stars as well as the torch held in Steid's hand.

Soon after they passed the second moat, they came into view of a large tent

which housed the Dragons.

Beyond the moats, only two humans, Thenardier and Steid, existed.

Chains were wrapped around the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon which was held down by stakes driven deep into the earth. Most Dragons would not be stopped by something like this, but it relieved some of the soldiers' anxieties.

Under the large tent, which was the size of twenty tents used by the soldiers, within a fence, all the Dragons woke up and gazed at Thenardier and Steid as they approached.

"Steid. They really are like cats."

Thenardier suddenly said those words. His right hand man with fair hair, who had been expressionless until then, showed surprise on his face. The Duke continued to speak without turning around.

"No need to be afraid. They will not just eat you in a moment."

"... Thank you for the consideration."

Thenardier looked at the Double Headed Dragon in the back of the tent. Its overwhelming form clearly showed it was not an existence that could be stood up to by trivial creatures like man. Its four eyes shined brightly in the darkness as it looked down at Thenardier in apathy.

It turned its heads to a bloody mound of meat on the floor. Steid divided it and set it before the two heads.

Thenardier stood at the foot of the Double Headed Dragon, his hand placed on its thick scales. Though the Double Headed Dragon remained motionless, the sound of black chains rang throughout.

"Steid. What do you think is the reason for our victory today?"

Thenardier asked Steid a question while confirming the feeling beneath his palm.

"It was the Dragon's strength and the enemy's poor movements."

Thenardier's loyal subject answered in that manner.

"Though I don't understand the reason, Marquis Greast was suddenly ordered

to return to Lutetia. The enemy's movements were dull because of that."

He explained the reasons to Steid as he recalled the battle.

Ganelon's army was deployed in the fields of Montauban in a faithful manner. Thirteen thousand were in the center, seven thousand on each flank, and two thousand in the rear.

It was not necessarily wrong. When fighting in a plain without many troughs and crests, they would fight them head on with their superior numbers.

Thenardier, on the other hand, had a similar setup; however, he had five thousand in the center, six thousand in reserve, and seven thousand on each wing. Furthermore, the reserve troops was far behind the main force.

The five Dragons were located between the central unit and the reserve forces.

When the fight began, the Ganelon Army fiercely broke through the center, since it was five thousand against thirteen thousand. The troops to the left and right were naturally holding the rest of Thenardier's Army off as they broke through.

The five thousand troops that made the core of the troops could not stand against Ganelon's numbers and threw their arms aside. They ran away and scattered. The Ganelon Army turned to aid its other units, most likely trying to end the battle early.

After their first victory near the King's Capital, the Ganelon Army remained on the offensive. Thenardier's Army continued to retreat ungracefully and were accustomed to moving back.

The moment they had pushed through the center, the Dragons were simultaneously released and they attacked the Ganelon soldiers. Six roars were sounded through the air, drowning out the screams of humans.

The thirteen thousand Ganelon soldiers fell into a state of panic and retreated. Both the flanks also began to surrender.

In addition, there was a group blocking the path of retreat of the Ganelon Army. It was the six thousand strong reserve force. As soon as the fight began,

Steid commanded them to move around the outskirts of the battlefield.

This was the bet Thenardier made when using the Dragons.

“If Marquis Greast commanded the men today, we may very well have been defeated.”

Steid said those words. If the Ganelon Army was under Greast's command, they would have moved and acted more carefully. It was also because they moved poorly during their retreat that Thenardier was able to take advantage of them.

“Greast would have cut off our path of retreat earlier on if he were in charge.”

Steid became silent, supporting Thenardier's words. His humility was somewhat unsatisfactory for Thenardier. Though he was an excellent man who stood out above other aristocrats, he was unable to think of a plan or two when using Dragons.

“Steid. I have told you many times that it is natural for the excellent and powerful to stand above others. We need to clearly show our strength every once in a while to show the world our superiority.”

“I agree.”

Steid answered indifferently. It was a conversation frequently exchanged between the two. Thenardier sighed in his mind, hearing Steid's usual response, and continued to speak.

“If you were leading, how would you deal with the Dragons?”

“Melee combat.”

Steid quickly responded. By melee, he meant he would bring friend and foe together, preventing the enemy from using the Dragons.

“And what if they retreat?”

“I will not allow them to retreat. If they try, I would use that opportunity to pierce through their defenses and aim at the General.”

“Assume you are the General of my army and the enemy does this. What would you do in return?”

This time, Steid could not respond promptly. While he thought of a reply, Thenardier stood quietly, calmly touching the Dragon's scales.

His figure showed no signs of fear. There were many who disliked Thenardier, but even they would have to say he was bold.

“My son went to Alsace with two Dragons and died.”

He spoke of Zaien. Thenardier's voice was full of strong emotions. The Dragon moved its neck in response to it, while Steid found himself unconsciously stiffening up from the tension.

“Do not worry, Steid. I am calm.”

Steid was not a man who would be relieved simply with those words. He remained Thenardier's trusted confidante because he could keep his fear and doubt in check.

That is why he asked once again.

“Really, you still wish to do that? Tigrevurmud Vorn seems such an insignificant existence before Your Excellency.”

He avoided bringing up revenge.

“I do.”

Thenardier accepted Steid's words frankly. How unusual, he thought as he looked upon his superior's pale face. Thenardier continued to speak.

“I will not accept it unless I see it with my eyes. I don't know anything about that brat, but if he had no strength, he would have run out of luck long ago and died.”

Thenardier had gathered information on Tigre and Ganelon. He analyzed it and kept thinking on it. Of course, he knew of Tigre's activities.

“He lived through the Battle of Dinant. What's more, he came back to Brune with Zhcted's cooperation.”

He had been in one desperate fight after another since then. He swept away the bases in the Vosyes Mountains, defeated the assassins Thenardier hired, Repelled the Black Knight Roland and the Navarre Knighthood, and even pushed

back the Muozinel Army.

After thinking that far, Thenardier remembered one more thing.

*--- Rumor has it he's giving shelter to Regin...*

He was not sure of the facts, but when he heard word that Tigre was protecting the daughter of the Royal Family, Thenardier felt an impact throughout his body, as if he were struck by lightning.

If he had been told Tigre was protecting the prince, he would have laughed it off.

However, Prince Regnas was, so to speak, a virtual image. Thenardier knew he was truly the Princess, Regin.

This small Earl from a frontier territory could not be made light of. Felix Aaron Thenardier knew he must bury the man. If he was left alone any longer, he would become a formidable enemy.

“The soldiers of Zhcted are strong, so it would be best to avoid having them fight against the Dragons. The soldiers of Alsace are out of the question. I wonder where we should attack.”

Though it was an abrupt change in topic, Steid understood immediately that he was talking about how to fight against Tigre.

On their side, the key to victory were their Dragons. For the enemy, it was the Vanadis.

“I heard from those that took part in battle that the Vanadis with a sword blew the Dragon away.”

*--- I thought it was nonsense when I saw the report.*

However, he could do nothing but consent, seeing the strength of a Dragon before him. Only a supernatural power would be able to destroy such a creature. It was not something Thenardier, Steid, or even those with superior military skills could handle.

Thenardier's hand stopped moving and he looked back at Steid. A cruel, cold passion dyed Thenardier's eyes, his violent face projecting through the darkness.

"Steid, Our next battle will be against Vorn. Prepare to take measures."

A horse, one koku away, ran toward Perucche Castle. He saw the highway, his back to the forests and mountains. There were many small lakes and hunting villages in the region.

Tigre had heard of the area from the soldiers in the fortress, but only showed a tepid reaction when they spoke of it.

Before long, the day grew dark. Late at night, everyone would be asleep.

In a room deep in the castle, Tigre quickly changed his clothes and prepared his bow and arrows. He wrapped a cloth about his head so only his eyes were visible.

Batran, who had served him, would remain here and take care of Tigre's duties, saying Tigre was in poor condition and was resting.

*-- If I leave the castle now, I'll get to the forest before dawn. I can walk around for a koku and come back before mid day.*

Because they had been at Perucche Castle for ten days, he roughly knew its structure, and he had made preparations for it. Using a rope, he climbed out the window and landed on the ground. Carefully erasing his presence, Tigre made his way through the fortress. He had headed toward the back gate to the north and already had an excuse prepared. In his bosom was a letter signed by the General, Tigrevurmud Vorn; it had a seal, so it was the real thing. After all, he, the person in question, prepared it.

He entered a room with a chair and desk that had a window open to the back gate. However, as soon as he opened the window, Tigre heard a voice behind him.

"Where are you going so late at night?"

Hearing a cold voice cross examine him, Tigre cringed on reflex. The next voice he heard, however, had a mixture of laughter and amazement.

When he turned around, he saw Ellen and Lim standing before him. Ellen smiled cheerfully, and Lim appeared antisocial as usual.

“... How did you know?”

Ellen began explaining boastfully with her arms crossed.

“Lim noticed it. If you were going to slip out, you would use the back gate, and you would need to pass through this room. She's been pretty worried about you for the last few days. Honestly, she's ready to become a bride.”

“Wha... What are you saying, so suddenly!”

Hearing her Lord's thoughts, Lim's flat expression broke away immediately and became red. Tigre looked at Ellen and Lim, also embarrassed.

“Is it bad? Tigre may be a Brune person, but when he comes to live in Zhcted, it wouldn't be bad for him to find someone. Isn't it fine, it's not like you two are unfamiliar with each other's body, right?”

She spoke bluntly. Both Tigre and Lim were at a loss for words.

Lim had seen Tigre when he was bathing once before, and Lim's clothes were removed when Tigre sucked out the poison from her body.

Tigre gazed at Lim. Because she was typically stone faced, her panic seemed refreshing.

Perhaps misunderstanding Tigre's gaze, Lim looked at him angrily and covered her chest as she remembered what had happened before.

Tigre opened his mouth to clear up the misunderstanding, but he could not think of anything appropriate to say. This, of course, had the opposite effect.



After watching the two for a while, Ellen turned to Tigre and smiled gently.

“Don't let it trouble you too much.”

“... Sorry.”

Tigre bowed obediently. It would not do for the General to lose himself to his desires and go hunting late at night.

“All right. Let's go, then.”

Ellen cheerfully said goodbye as she waved to him. Tigre turned around vacantly.

“I can't say hunting is useful right now, but I'm sure you need a good walk to clear your mind. Also, I'll go with you... and sorry for what I said.”

Ellen walked away with a gentle smile as she left. Lim walked quietly after her, and, Tigre, after panicking, followed the two.

The three walked to the back gate. The night wind blew, making Tigre duck his head on reflex.

Countless stars and the moon could be seen in the sky. Due to the dark clouds in the sky, there were more along the horizon.

Tigre walked down the road using the moonlight and the stars to light his way. The air was still cold, even as the end of winter approached.

*--- It's been a long time since I felt like this.*

Tigre realized how at ease he felt simply walking through the darkness. With the Muozinel Army's invasion, the situation had not settled down until today. He had had no spare time since then.

What Tigre would do could very well influence the entire country, and the future battle could also influence Zhcted. Without him realizing, many emotions had accumulated.

“To think I would ally with a Vanadis.”

Tigre spoke in a tone akin to a monologue, but he spoke to Ellen rather than himself. She kneeled only before her King and had the power to slaughter a Dragon. How much pressure was placed upon a Vanadis?

"The only one you could sincerely trust was Lim. The vassals led by your predecessor were all excellent, and though I supported you, it was selfish of me to not notice your burden immediately. Really, you've worked so hard."

Ellen looked at Tigre with gentle eyes.

"The burden you bear is not something I can take, but I can give you support. Lim and I, and Teita as well, so just hold on a little longer."

"--- That's right. I'll hold off on the fun a little longer."

After that, Tigre gave his thanks. He felt he must become stronger for the people supporting him.

Suddenly, the longsword at Ellen's waist blew a wind through her hair. The Vanadis with ruby eyes smiled bitterly. After combing her silver-white hair with her hand, she calmed the longsword by tapping its sheath.

"Of course, this guy trusts you as well. Still, our first meeting was rather sudden."

Her sword manipulated the wind, as if complaining about Ellen's words, complaining that it was not included.

Seeing Ellen and Arifal communicate with each other, Tigre turned his gaze to the black bow in his saddle. Knowing it was a family heirloom given to him at birth, he felt it eerie and avoided it as much as possible.

*--- Ellen trusts Arifal. I wonder if I can trust this guy.*

Complex emotions ran through his chest. He had relied on the bow's power many times, but Tigre did not trust it completely. Somewhere in his heart, he felt it was dangerous and feared it.

Although he did not feel the odd sensation he once had, he was unable to release his anger that the Goddess of Darkness, Tir na Fa, which had some relation to the bow, had possessed Teita.

*--- Will I understand this bow before I head to LeitMeritz?*

He tried to think about it again. Both Brune and Zhcted had a common religion. There may be a clue on Tir na Fa in Zhcted.

“---Tigre.”

Unexpectedly, Ellen called his name out. The Vanadis looked back at Tigre with an earnest expression.

“Do you remember the words you told me the evening you decided to fight?”

It was the middle of autumn, and it was a night that changed Tigre's fate. He would change from prisoner to something else in a few days. Tigre wiped all idle thoughts from his head and nodded.

“In return for borrowing your soldiers, Alsace would become yours.”

“That's right. Just for the record, you're mine. Given your recent attitude toward Ludmira, it seems you've forgotten your position.”

After blatantly reminding him, Ellen stopped walking and looked at the night sky.

“If I obtain your territory, I will present it to the King. I was able to move my army on the premise that he would have any land I might receive. Alsace's grounds will be under direct control of the King's troops.”

“Though I have heard this before... Is the King of Zhcted good in governing his territories?”

In response to Tigre's question, Ellen smiled ironically.

“Basically, you will govern the territory yourself; however, that doesn't mean there won't be any restrictions. He may grant the Alsace to someone with distinguished services, depending on negotiations with Brune.”

Hearing an answer far from optimal, Tigre made a difficult face and looked at the ground. The light did not reach his feet, as if that very shadow was wrapping about Tigre's future.

He suddenly wondered why she began talking about this.

Suddenly, Ellen gazed straight at Tigre.

“It's a good opportunity, so I'll keep talking.”

Tigre had been wondering since that day. Ellen had loaned her soldiers to him, but he did not know in what way she benefited from it.

With war came consumption of food and fuel. Armor, horses, men, all were lost. If she did not have something to gain, she would not have done all this.

Even looking back at all these past battles, even if Ellen gained control of Alsace, she would still be left with a large deficit.

“My aim was control over Vosyes. That was the only reason, at least at first.”

She spoke with a bitter smile. Tigre tilted his neck. Vosyes referred to the sequence of steep mountains which ran between Brune and Zhcted. There were a few trails and some places where bandits lived, but there was nothing particularly valuable.

“Let me change the topic for a bit. You know that tea Ludmira is always drinking? It comes from Muozinel. The merchants from Muozinel must first head through those mountains to enter Olmutz. The path is well maintained and the security is good.”

Ellen's smile disappeared. She continued without any sign of interest in her appearance.

“Draw a map in your head. When they leave Olmutz, where do they go?”

“... Silesia?”

It was the Royal Capital of Zhcted Kingdom and the most prosperous city in the country, so merchants travel there.

“That's right. They don't go to LeitMeritz where I govern. Naturally, they would go to Silesia because the flow of money is good there. The market is crowded and there are products from many countries there, including Brune. I also direct merchants toward Silesia.”

When Ellen looked away from the sky, she folded her arms and looked at Tigre. Her red eyes looked at him in interest. Tigre, not knowing her intention, looked away in embarrassment. Lim, who had remained silent, came to his rescue.

“Lord Tigrevurmud. The other time, when Eleanora-sama rushed to Legnica, there were merchants from Brune and Asvarre who were visiting from across the sea.”

Hearing her words without explanation, Tigre ran through the map in his head once again. Merchants from Muozinel, Olmutz, Legnica...

He was startled. Tigre clapped his hands without thought. Ellen smiled upon seeing his reaction. The young Lord of Alsace turned to the Vanadis with silver-white hair to confirm his answer.

“Your purpose is to make Brune pay for a mountain path between Alsace and LeitMeritz through the Vosyes Mountains?”

Ellen smiled brightly. Apparently it was the correct answer.

“Not quite perfect, but you pass. My LeitMeritz is not poor, but the inflow of goods from other countries is inferior to the other territories.”

“Though merchants from the King's Capital visit LeitMeritz, the price is still higher compared to other lands, and we do not get much, either. Though, because of this, LeitMeritz has retained all its local cultures.”

Lim added with a gentle voice.

“This is a problem that has existed since the previous Vanadis. We've been keeping an eye on the mountain paths of Vosyes. If it's further maintained and security is improved, it will become the shortest path connecting Nice and Silesia.”

There must have been a reason it had remained untouched until then.

It takes money, time, and people for maintenance. Furthermore, the Vosyes Mountains were on the western edge of LeitMeritz, so the burden would be massive.

Since it was near the border, any attempts to maintain the highway would stimulate Brune. Since it was along the border, they would undoubtedly have doubts about being invaded.

“It won't go just because we think about it. Though I had thought about working on it for some time, well, it turned out the way it is.”

Ellen smiled bitterly.

“It isn't a war to obtain territory but a war to gain new ties.”

If Thenardier is defeated, his money would be used to maintain the paths across Vosyes. Of course, it would receive the official recognition of Brune Kingdom. This would be the cheapest way to have this done in comparison, though she would have to keep an eye out for obstructions and delays.

The King of Zhcted would also allow it. To keep an eye out on Brune, he would protect Alsace, which was under his direct control.

“Why did you wait until now to tell me?”

“Even if I told you before, I'm not sure if you would understand.”

Ellen responded as if unconcerned. Tigre shrugged his shoulders bitterly. Though she said it bluntly, he did not mind at all. He was sure he would not understand in those days where his eyes were only on Alsace.

“And more than anything – I just wanted you to know.”

Ellen said those words with her back turned to Tigre.

After that, they walked for a quarter koku and returned to the castle.

However, he had no chance to rest. Surprising information appeared unexpectedly.

“The scout who returned from Lutetia a short time ago reported that Artishem has been burnt... It has burned to the ground.”

Tigre was unable to understand his words for a moment. After taking three breaths, he finally understood and stood in stunned surprise.

# Chapter 2 - Fire Drake and Double Headed Dragon

“... A special envoy?”

Sophia Obertas tilted her head as she sat with a vacant expression. She let out a small noise.

Sophie was a close friend of Ellen and Mira. She was a tall beauty with beryl eyes and golden hair which gently shook. She was wrapped in a light green dress and exuded a mysterious charm, even to those of the same gender.

In her hand was a bishop staff which shined a brilliant gold, giving way to her alias of [Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower]. Though a young girl of 20 years, she was still the eldest of the Vanadis.

She was currently in Silesia, the Royal Capital of Zhcted Kingdom. She kneeled in a room deep inside the Royal Palace before an elderly man sitting atop a throne. Currently, only Sophie and this old man were present.

“That is correct. I wish for you to go once more, though I just sent you to Brune at the end of autumn.”

The old man was the King of Zhcted, Victor. Though his beard and hair were graying, he had a dignified atmosphere. He had dark skin, and, despite his weakness, his eyes showed an impressive vitality. Extending from his luxurious, purple, silk clothes were hands of skin and bone.

“The Muozinel Army has invaded, and the situation in Brune has changed drastically. Eleanora Viltaria has also been gone for half a year. Though it is good that her duties are still being done, but any longer and I will be forced to pull her back.”

*--- I wonder if that really is the reason. There must be something more.*

While muttering those words in her mind, Sophie accepted the King's words.

Though he left the territories in the care of the Vanadis, it was still not good to leave the country for half a year.

Though the King had a solid opportunity to reduce the power of the Vanadis, he wanted to avoid a situation which would badly influence the entirety of Zhcted.

"I shall give words of thanks to His Majesty for his consideration on behalf of the Vanadis not present. However, I must tell you that Ludmira Lurie is currently acting as an investigator to watch over Eleanora's actions. When considering the relationship the two have, I believe Eleanora would not do anything foolish."

The discord between Ellen and Mira was well known in the Royal Palace. When Sophie brought this to the King's attention, she wondered why he had not thought of it.

"As you say, their relationship is not good."

The voice of the old man withered like a dead tree; there was a sense of admiration.

"This is information I have not heard before. Sophia, I believe you are quite close with Eleanora, and you returned from Brune just the other day. I wish for you to go back."

"... I respectfully accept your orders."

Hearing her orders, Sophie turned about without saying any more. With her head hung, she thought about what the King was planning.

*--- He is trying to make use of Ellen and Mira's bad relationship...*

As the King said, Sophie had been ordered to act as a special envoy though she had just recently visited Brune.

Though there were diplomats who specialized in dealing with Brune Kingdom, the opponent could not act poorly toward the Vanadis, who were second only to the King. She was obviously effective as a messenger.

After leaving the meeting, as she walked down the corridor at a lax pace, Sophie continued to think.

*--- His Majesty is using my good relation with Ellen to get rid of me until after the war is over.*

Sophie realized King Victor's aim.

It was not unusual. It was not limited to King Victor and was done by various rulers of the past.

There were many Kings who thought to reduce the power of the Vanadis, and there were others that thought to exploit it but could not.

*--- King Victor is, without a doubt, the former.*

However, Sophie did not know how far he intended to hinder her friend. She only prayed that nothing worse would come of it.

“--- If it isn't Sophia Obertas.”

A calm voice interrupted Sophie's thoughts. When she looked up, she saw a young woman walking toward her.

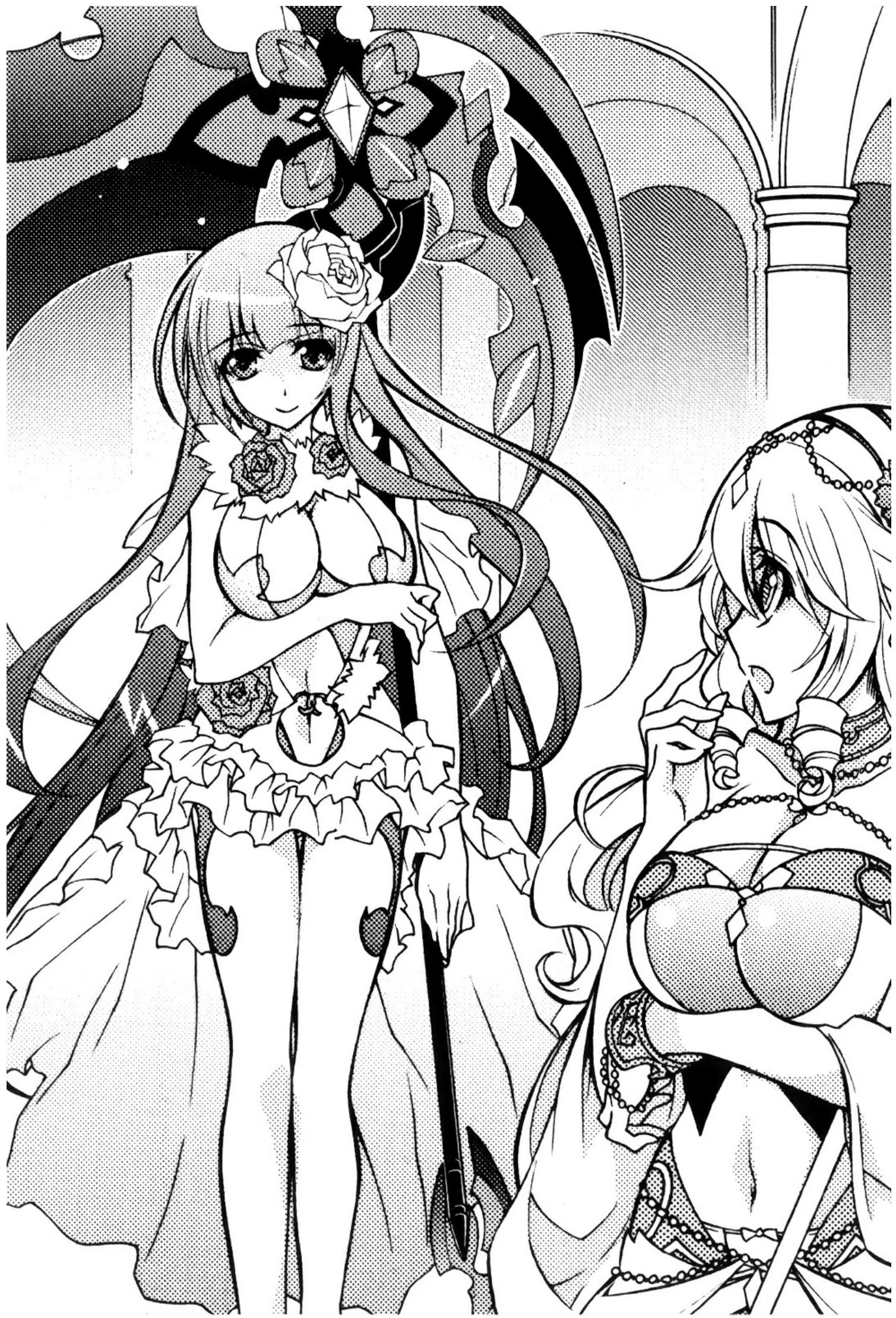
A white rose shined in her blue-black hair, giving her a distinct impression. Bright red and purple roses adorned her snow-white dress, and as if to destroy any sense of harmony, she wielded a mysterious scythe.

Surprise leaked from Sophie's voice and beryl eyes.

“Valentina...”

“It has been quite some time, Sophia.”

The beautiful woman was called Valentina. She gave a delicate smile that made her seem fragile, as if she would shatter with a single touch. Sophie, one step behind, returned a smile of her own.



“Yes. It has been quite a while. Why are you in the palace?”

“I wish only to remain in my country, but there is information I must find by all means; however, there are more than one thousand men in the Palace. It is far too lively for me, and I have become exhausted.”

While pressing her hand to her mouth, she let out a yawn.

Valentina Glinka Estes was a Vanadis like Sophia and was known as the <sup>Shervid</sup> [Illusionary Princess of the Hollow Shadow]. The reason she had two names was because she was an aristocrat since birth.

Valentina governed the territory of Osterode in north Zhcted. Though Valentina rarely left, she was not in poor health.

Though she appeared occasionally, she would return at once, using her physical condition as an excuse.

“You do look tired. You should be healthy enough to use your <sup>Viralt</sup> Dragonic Tool, right?”

Her beryl eyes looked toward the scythe in Valentina's hand.

Her Dragonic Tool, Hollow Shadow Ezendeis, had the second name of <sup>Fuyou no Rekku</sup> [Rending Void of the Supernatural Seal]. From what Sophie knew, it gave her the ability to travel anywhere, ignoring distance and the thickness and heights of boundaries.

“I cannot.”

Valentina slowly shook her head with a smile.

“The further the distance, the more stamina I use. It is far too much for me... The other day, I traveled between rooms and was tired for the next three days.”

Valentina stroked the large scythe lovingly as if it were a child as she complained. Sophie decided to change the subject.

“However, it is quite unusual for you to come to the Royal Palace. We should have some tea.”

“Well...”

Valentina looked down in thought then looked up immediately with a smile.

"If you wish to, then please."

--- *Now then, I wonder if I can learn anything from her...*

While walking alongside Valentina, Sophie thought such things without breaking her smile. She invited someone she was not particularly intimate with for a few reasons.

Sophie did not believe her to be sickly. Though she had no evidence, she could not help but think so. Also, she wanted to learn more of Valentina's purpose. Valentina rarely appeared before others, so there was little opportunity to learn about her.

Sophie could not help but think she was hiding some unknown ambition.



As the day broke, tension filled the conference room in Perucche Fortress. Tigre, Ellen, Lim, Massas, Mira, and Regin surrounded a table.

"Why did he burn it down?"

Ellen started the meeting, frowning with her arms crossed, swaying in frustration. Massas was the one to answer.

"According to the message, Duke Ganelon set fire to his city himself..."

"Is there a mistake? Perhaps it was a small fire somewhere in the city and it was exaggerated."

Mira tilted her neck. Massas responded with a deep face as he stroked his beard.

"It is not uncommon for fires to start in this season. Lutetia is in the north and is colder than the rest of Brune, but it is difficult to imagine something like that could happen so close to Duke Ganelon's home."

"If such a large city burns, it is natural to think the enemy started it... But Thenardier's Army, they're still south of Nice, right?"

Lim nodded. According to the scout's report, Duke Thenardier's Army was slowly pushing Duke Ganelon's Army while heading north.

*-- If not Duke Thenardier, then who...?*

While Tigre was brooding with a serious expression, he noticed Regin appeared pale. More so than his own, the shock must have been larger for her.

"Your Highness. Our schedule will not change. We will move to Artishem as planned."

He smiled to reassure her, though he could not help but feel the irony in his mind. Because Regin was a Princess, she did not think she had anyone she could rely on, yet the damage was unexpectedly mitigated by the people with her now.

"Thank you, Lord Tigrevurmud."

Regin smiled bravely and slightly nodded her head.

Though Thenardier's Army had accepted the twenty thousand soldiers from Ganelon's Army who surrendered, creating a force exceeding forty thousand, he cast them aside far from Nemetacum when in view of the Royal Capital.

"Weak soldiers are unnecessary. It takes time to kill them all, so don't bother with those that run away."

He beheaded an aristocrat with more than one thousand troops inside his territory. The remaining twenty thousand threw aside their arms and were tossed away without provisions.

Thenardier never had the intention to accept them.

He had twenty-five thousand troops and five Dragons. If his army doubled, of course the required food and fuel consumption would double as well. Though Thenardier might have been able to prepare that, he was not in the mind to do so.

Nevertheless, he had a reason to allow them to march with him until then.

One reason is because the battlefield they surrendered at was close to Nemetacum. Even if he had taken their arms and food, they might have

devastated his territory, so it was necessary to pull them away.

Also, there would be too many allies. He would need to divide the territory he gained from battle amongst them all.

He was further worried that they might run to Tigrevurmud Vorn. Though his army might have been large, they held little loyalty to him. By doing this, he planted a fear inside their minds.

Regardless, if the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] accepted them, it would only increase their food and fuel consumption.

However, the biggest reason was what Thenardier had told them.

Thenardier hated weak and incompetent people.

The only exception was his son.

The next day, the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] left Perucche Fortress. They had left three days ahead of schedule.

Alongside the troops led by Tigre, Massas, and Augre, at the core were the LeitMeritz troops led by Ellen and the Olmutz Army led by Mira. Though there was dissatisfaction that a foreign army was part of the main force, Massas managed to persuade them.

Other than that, there were soldiers from the aristocrats that joined during the battle against the Muozinel Army.

As they advanced down the road leading to Lutetia, Tigre had many scouts move in various directions. Some looked for excellent hiding places in the surroundings, others went to explore the movements of Thenardier's Army, and some investigated the situation in Lutetia.

A sharp wind came from the sky and pink flowers bloomed along the road, making the transition from winter to spring.

As they advanced, they received more information which would likely be increasingly accurate. Occasionally, they encountered merchants and travelers. Tigre would invite them to his tent and talk to them over a meal and alcohol.

Incidentally, Ellen, Mira, and Batran also attended these talks.

As for Massas, his hands were tied up commanding the entire army. Lim and Rurick took charge of the LeitMeritz Army while Gerard took care of the supply line behind the scenes.

Regin did not make an appearance because her presence made Tigre anxious. Though she was the one who most wanted to hear about the state of Lutetia, Tigre did not know what kind of answer they would hear and what reaction she would have.

“Where did all of you come from?”

“From Lutetia.”

A middle aged man who seemed to command the caravan responded with the utmost bravado. His attitude was natural, since many caravans which encountered an army were stripped of all they had.

Even if they were an army, it was possible they were enemy spies. There were many reasons to remain suspicious of possible mercenary armies. What was important was to make sure his cargo was not stolen.

Though Tigre examined their property, he did not deprive them of a single copper coin. Although it took time, it did not present a problem, since he had made the majority of his army move ahead.

“I heard Artishem of Lutetia was burned. Have you heard the circumstances?”

“All the rumors are true.”

The man spoke falteringly.

“Our Lord lost the battle and went mad. Ignoring the residents, he set fire to the city... Though Artishem is enclosed by walls, there are fight gates. However, they were all shut.”

Hearing this story, Tigre and the others had difficult complexions. It was a difficult story.

Still, Tigre collected his thoughts at once and continued listening to the story while asking questions. Once the conversation was over, Tigre let out a small breath.

“If this story is true, then this is no simple matter...”

Ellen snorted provokingly. Mira knit her brows.

“We will reach Lutetia in two days. Duke Thenardier's Army will pass Nice and continue north.”

It was a difficult situation. Batran, who had been standing silent with a difficult expression until now, stood before Tigre having made up his mind.

“Young Lord. I do not believe this situation to be difficult. If he has abandoned his land, then we can simply take control of the castle.”

“Turn it into a defensive battle?”

Tigre wanted to protest against his old servant's words, but gave it thought seeing his earnest expression.

--- *Is it really a bad idea to take control of the castle?*

Artishem, though burned and collapsed, was the center of Lutetia and Duke Ganelon's city of residence. It would be effective politically if the flag of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] was placed there.

Drawing a map of Brune in his head, Artishem was in the middle of north Brune. If he suppressed the area, he would grasp the majority of the northern supply lines.

--- *More than anything, if their city has been burnt down, I would like to help them.*

Tigre looked back at Ellen and Mira while giving it thought.

However, their reaction was not pleasant at all. Ellen's brow was wrinkled and Mira stared sternly into Tigre's eyes.

“It is a risky gamble with a high probability of defeat.”

“I agree with her for once. Abandon this plan.”

“... Is it really that difficult?”

Tigre flinched seeing the two veteran Vanadis oppose the idea.

“It is the largest city in the north of Brune where the residents number double our own. We will not be able to take control.”

"There is also the possibility that half the city has been burned down. With corpses in such high quantities, there will be disease throughout. Also, it would be a problem if Duke Thenardier appeared while we give aid to the citizens."

What the two said was justifiable. The <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] did not have the food or fuel to support them above all else.

"It is possible we could appeal to the Royal Capital to help supply food and water through Lord Massas or Her Highness."

Ellen shrugged her shoulders to Tigre's desperate proposal.

"Well, it's better than doing nothing. It's a good idea to ask the Royal Capital for help. After that, we can ask all the surrounding nobles and the Knights to help defend the castle."

"That is not a bad idea from you. Depending on their reaction, we could even incorporate them into our troops."

"Ho ho, to think you would give a compliment. Is this a harbinger of heavenly blessings or a natural calamity?"

"Naturally it would be a natural calamity if we follow whatever is going on in your head. It seems you have been spoiling him too much."

The beautiful expression on the face of the two girls was lost in an instant as they glared and elbowed each other. A wind and cold air began to envelop the tent, causing everyone inside to shudder.

"Please stop fighting. I'm depending on both of you."

Though Tigre tried to calm down them down, his words were counterproductive.

"Aren't I obviously more reliable than her? You won't get anywhere if you indulge this spoiled girl."

"There is nothing to be gained from this veteran who can only boast of her size, Tigre."

Tigre knew this would take time and turned away from the two to signal to Batran to stand outside. Enduring the cold, he returned to the two once again.

The quarrel lasted for a quarter koku.

The next day, the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] stopped their march about a half day's walk from Artishem. They knew Thenardier's scouts would be approaching Artishem as well.

"Duke Thenardier's Army is approximately fifty to sixty belsta (about fifty or sixty kilometers) away. If both armies continue at their current pace, we will meet by the end of the day."

Tigre decided to stop. He did not want his soldiers to be attacked when they were tired from a long day's march.

There was also a need to reorganize the troops. A group of soldiers from Duke Ganelon's Army appeared three days ago. With an extra seven thousand troops, the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] numbered twenty thousand.

"We can handle no more than this, whether it be a dog or a cat, let alone a soldier. Please set a condition that they must bring one hundred spears, fifty horses, or food for fifty if they wish to join."

Gerard Augre was in charge of the distribution of food, fuel, and arms, and reported with a spiteful attitude. Tigre flinched before the threatening atmosphere emanating from the youth with brown hair.

"It's that bad?"

"I will say this bluntly. Our soldiers are strangely sensitive to the decrease in their food. For instance, the vegetable soup---"

Gerard's eyes and tone became sharper.

"Assume the normal soup has carrots, beans, potatoes, and salt. We have gotten rid of the beans and have thinned out the salt. Though we can deceive them for a time, it will be discovered within four or five days."

Gerard leaned over with a pile of papers in his hand and continued.

"There is some speculation amongst the soldiers that the food is being taken from them by the enemy, and that their allies are being incompetent. It was expected to some extent, but with a powerful opponent looming ahead, there

are more who are thinking of fleeing."

He continued to speak rapidly. Needless to say, Tigre understood his point. Since they were so close to Thenardier's Army, they stopped accepting soldiers because there was the possibility of Thenardier's men disguising themselves.

In a tent with the <sup>Bayard</sup> Red Horse Flag of Brune, <sup>Zirnitra</sup> Black Dragon Flag of Zhcted, and the flags of house Vorn and LeitMeritz above it, Tigre held a war council.

"Duke Thenardier was thought to lead an army of forty thousand, but that is an exaggeration."

Claiming to control more troops was not unusual.

It would be profitable if the enemy troops believed it, It would foster suspicion between new soldiers, and simply by increasing the number of flags, they could easily deceive scouts.

"Though it is an exaggeration... when you gather all the reports, they certainly have more than twenty thousand."

Massas stroked his beard and made a bitter face. He had enough power in his hands to pull the hair off his face.

Tigre had a cold sweat mentally. The <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] had a mixture of twenty thousand men.

Also, while he could not, Duke Thenardier could return to Nemetacum to replenish his supplies and reorganize his troops.

"We can't wish for any more, rather, we should be grateful we have closed the gap this far."

"Still, Duke Thenardier's Army barely reduced in his last battle with Duke Ganelon."

Lim tilted her head expressionlessly. Massas responded to her doubt.

"There are five Dragons in Duke Thenardier's Army. The battle ended quickly because they took the lead."

Dragons. Tigre and Massas trembled after hearing the word. Only Ellen and Mira remained calm. Lim as well showed no sign of tension in her face.

"Well, we'll take care of them. We can't let the soldiers do everything."

Ellen spoke nonchalantly. Tigre bowed while bitterly gripping his knee.

"I apologize that I must leave it to you."

"No need to worry. The right man at the right place. Though you are the General, it would be useless for you to make a move."

Tigre nodded wryly after hearing Mira's words of comfort.

"Duke Ganelon is out of the picture. This fight against Duke Thenardier will likely become our final battle."

Regin gazed at the map tensely. She looked toward Artishem. Those present knew the tragedy which took place in the city.

It was a hideous thing which simply made them nauseous.

There were two signs that something would happen. One was a carriage traveling back and forth numerous times between the northern gate and Duke Ganelon's mansion. The other happened to be soldiers working beneath Ganelon creating many fuel depositories across Artishem.

Those with sharp intuition saw these two events happening, and, after four or five days, left the city with their family; however, they were a very small minority in a large urban environment. Most residents remained.

Of course, they were all uneasy. To begin with, Duke Ganelon was known for his outrageous brutality, and for carrying out cruel acts on a whim. Furthermore, news of Ganelon's defeat by the Thenardier Army reached their ears, though it was still a rumor.

Still, it was difficult for anyone to leave the city where they lived for many years simply out of anxiety.

Anyone who could think their Lord would burn down the city and its residents of his own volition would not be a normal human.

The fire began at midnight, and it was started in Ganelon's residence. The luxurious, three story mansion which towered high above in a place where he could overlook most of the city was wrapped in flames, flickering before a

backdrop of darkness.

The fire reached the fuel depositories throughout the city. In each depository, barrels were filled with oil, lined with fat, and had piles of firewood surrounding them, which caused them to quickly erupt into flames. The sparks were fanned by the wind from the north, spreading the fire in an instant.

Artishem was a city with history. It existed before Brune Kingdom came to power.

Though it was developed, and there were more shops and residential areas in the city, the central landscape was still the same as it once was.

There were stone buildings with beam ceilings and wooden doors and floors. The fire eventually spread there.

The greatest reason the people could not run away was because it began at midnight. Some jumped out of the houses, and a few managed to reach the castle gates.

A river flowed through the center of Artishem from the northeast, so many jumped into it to escape from the flames; however, few survived.

Though signs of winter's end approached, the river water was cold in the dead of night. With the flames fueled by the wind, there was a long wall of fire lining the river. Many were forced with the choice of death by drowning or inhaling the smoke and suffocating.

With the cold wind blowing from the north, the fire ran rampant and quickly reached the southeastern part of Artishem.

Security guards desperately fought the fire throughout the city with the cooperation of the citizens; but the fire burned much of the city. By the time it disappeared, dawn had arrived. The sun began to rise, and the moon could be seen sinking in the western sky.

There were numerous corpses accompanying the city burning to ruins.

At the same time, news of Ganelon's death circulated about northern Brune. To say nothing of the various cities throughout Lutetia, the aristocrats who did not fight in the war alongside Ganelon's troops were deeply impacted in the

midst of the public turmoil.

On the other hand, the soldiers of the Ganelon Army which was defeated by the Thenardier Army simply scattered in all directions.

Those who were not accepted in either the Thenardier Army or the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Fl</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] were left to wander the lands of Brune.

“... Before we defeat Duke Thenardier, let's apply for a truce.”

Tigre looked around as he proposed that to his friends. Ellen reacted quickly, her red eyes shining keenly.

“To save Artishem?”

Tigre nodded. He thought of words to say before he spoke again.

“When the Muozinel Army attacked from the sea, it was Duke Thenardier who defended the cities near the water.”

If Thenardier was aiming for supremacy in Brune, he would eventually aim to make Artishem his own. If possible, rebuilding it quickly would be advantageous.

Though Tigre gave that explanation, he did not receive a good reaction.

“Your idea is good, but Thenardier will not likely accept it.”

Ellen said this, and Mira shook her head.

“Tigre. Even if you offer this now, they would only suspect you of buying time. You could be gathering more troops using your reputation from your battle with the Muozinel Army.”

The two Vanadis opposed him. Tigre stared at Massas and Lim, but, as expected, no response returned.

“If I were in Duke Thenardier's position, I would give priority to destroying Lord Tigrevurmud's Army. Given your situation now, you should not give aid immediately. If you win, you can place responsibility on his shoulders.”

“Tigre. Your heart is in the right place, but you cannot do everything. It is only after you defeat Duke Thenardier that you will be able to bring about change.”

“... I understand.”

It was a reasonable argument. Tigre was saying unreasonable things, after all. If he took this action, he may jeopardize the twenty thousand soldiers following him. It was a mistake to confuse the means and the end.

“Lord Tigrevurmud.”

Regin, who had remained mute until then, spoke to Tigre in a steady voice.

“I must take responsibility for myself. Please do not suffer any more than necessary.”

“But, Your Highness...”

What she said was not wrong, and it was the right time for her to say so. From outside, a soldier requested a meeting. Massas stood up and received the report. When the old Earl returned, he reported with a difficult face.

“A message from Duke Thenardier came.”

Duke Thenardier's messenger reported his demands for the war. They were for Tigrevurmud Vorn's neck to be presented to him and for all aristocrats who supported him to be relieved of their territory and titles.

[Furthermore, Eleanora Viltaria and Ludmira Lurie are not to interfere and are to return to the Kingdom of Zhcted.]

--- *There is nothing about Regin...*

“What will you do, Tigre?”

The messenger was made to wait for a response, so Ellen asked Tigre.

“Will you offer the truce you presented a while ago?”

Massas said that, though it was clear he was suppressing his anger.

It was difficult to place any trust in the enemy. Thenardier would not possibly allow Massas and Augre, who supported Tigre from an early stage, to get away with just their territories and titles revoked. Even if he did not do anything now, he might make a move in one or two years.

Furthermore, he would secretly bury Regin. Thenardier's wife was King

Faron's niece. As someone who has a connection to the blood of the Royal Family, all obstacles would be gone if Tigre were dead.

He would not permit Regin's existence.

"I feel like I should make a demand rather than ask for a truce..."

"You could recommend they surrender and give them an equally coercive demand."

Hearing Ellen's words, Tigre made the messenger return with his response.

[Don't you still owe me reparations for your son's solleret on Alsace?]

The solleret refers to one's iron greaves. In this case, it signified his command over an army.

With this, negotiations broke down.

To the southeast of Artishem were the Villecresnes Plains. There were narrow forests to the north and south and a river connecting them, as well as small hills to the east.

There, the twenty thousand strong <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] faced off against the twenty-four thousand strong Thenardier Army.

The <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] divided its encampment between the central force, the right and left flanks, and the reserves to the rear.

The central unit consisted mostly of soldiers from Ganelon's Army with Tigre commanding them. Massas and Lim were by his side. The right wing was controlled by Mira and Ellen, and held the Zhcted Army. To the left were the soldiers and Knights that joined him after the war with Muozinel.

Though Tigre wanted to fight the Dragons alongside Ellen and Mira, he did not due to the overall situation.

"Certainly, we can get rid of the Dragons quickly with the power of your bow, but we will have a disadvantage without you taking charge at the front."

Commanding the Zhcted Army in the right flank, Ellen laughed and comforted Tigre. Mira also smiled fearlessly after giving him a parting remark.

"There is no need to look like that. There is no one either here or in Zhcted that could defeat an army with two Vanadis."

"Got it. Though it goes without saying, take care, you two."

Though Tigre saw the two with a smile and words of encouragement, he could not relieve his anxiety.

He had learned the fear of a Dragon firsthand.

His first encounter with a Dragon was when he was hunting in the mountains. His second time was in the fight against Zaien.

"... Lord Tigrevurmud."

His face looked difficult as he recalled the past. Lim called to him from the side.

"Please rest assured. Neither Eleanora-sama nor Ludmira-sama will be defeated."

"That's right..."

Tigre nodded as he grasped the black bow in his saddle.

"Lord Massas. What do you think of the enemy's appearance?"

"They are calm. They will fall back, though... in the way they did against the fight with Duke Ganelon's army. We have no room to relax."

They would lure the enemy back and bring the Dragons forward. That was the plan Thenardier had used before.

Thenardier's soldiers, like the Unstoppable Silver Flow [Silver Meteor Army], had a textbook formation.

Ten thousand infantry were in the center. Both wings had five thousand troops. Behind the main unit, the five Dragons were waiting, and four thousand enemies stood even further behind with Duke Thenardier. There were three thousand even further back as a reserve force.

This eccentric formation only displayed Duke Thenardier's arrogance and confidence. Rather than overwhelm the enemy with numbers, he would simply crush them from the front.

In the middle of the morning, while the sun continued climbing, a cold wind blew across the land. The two armies marched.

The moment the Zhcted Army fired a rain of arrows, Thenardier's men stopped and blocked the attack with their shields.

Screams tore through the air as countless men who could not block the arrows fell. Still, there were no openings in the troops.

After exhausting their arrows, the Zhcted Army retreated and sounded a horn. Both armies raised a cry and clashed. At first glance, they looked even.

Soldiers held up their shields to block spears, not allowing them to pass further, swords cut men down, axes crushed through helmets, and others followed after from all directions to carve the enemy apart.

Killing and being killed. As if it were a chain reaction, the earth was littered in corpses and screams, the grass was dyed dark red with blood.

Soldiers slumped over, their eyes hollow, trying to push their entrails back into the corpses of their comrades.

Because I am right, because the enemy is alive, because the enemy is cruel, because the enemy is fighting, in order to survive, everyone had their own reason to wield a sword or spear, a reason to brandish a hammer or an axe.

Of course, they believed the Commander they fought under was correct; however, the enemy before them had blades smeared with blood. The reality of attack ahead was trivial. Only the desperation remained in their mind.

While the central forces were in an intense exchange of offense and defense, the Zhcted Army in the right wing gradually pulled back. Thenardier's left army began advancing, carrying on this momentum. This was a trap set by the Zhcted Army.

Taking notice, Mira gathered five hundred men and attacked Thenardier's left wing from the side.

At that time, the Zhcted Army began a quick counter-offensive as planned. The left wing of the Thenardier Army was almost crushed in an instant. The men retreated to rebuild their formation.

--- Good.

Ellen smiled happily while commanding the Zhcted Army. At this time, under Tigre's command, the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army], began moving forward slowly. The Zhcted Army would soon approach the river and forest. It looked difficult to attack at a glance.

However, that was the goal. Ellen made a large detour and ran around the forest, joining with Mira to attack the Thenardier Army from the side. Although it was a rash action which left the right side open, there was a high chance of victory.

The left wing of the Thenardier Army, while recovering their formation near the forest and river, was assaulted. Furthermore, under Tigre's orders, Lim led the reserve troops to replace the right wing of his army. If the enemy attacked aggressively, there would have been a severe loss in her soldiers.

Lim had received another instruction from Tigre, so she separated from Tigre and took command of the reserves.

“Lord Massas. How is the left wing?”

The old man shook his stocky body and looked sternly at Tigre.

“You are the General. You should not use honorifics here.”

“Though I understand...”

He was about to speak formally again, but Tigre looked at Massas awkwardly as he began. Massas shook his head bitterly.

“The Knights of Perucche, Lutece, and Calvados are here. They won't lose to such an absurd opponent.”

“... It's odd hearing you speak so formally.”

“Please get used to it. It will be an interesting experience.”

Batran looked upon their conversation happily.

A half koku had passed and the sun approached its nidus. Suddenly, a change occurred on the battlefield. The Zhcted Army commanded by Ellen and Mira heard a cry from Thenardier's left wing.

"Don't be left behind."

"I should return those words to you."

Though they were the Commander and inspector, they stood at the head of the troops. Command was left to Rurick who remained behind.

The bald Knight had separated from Tigre long ago to carry out this important task. He was clearly bathed in a tense atmosphere.

Holding up the longsword which manipulates wind, brandishing the short spear covered in ice, the two Vanadis rushed into the enemy without hesitation. The Thenardier Army, surprised at the surprise attack, held up their shields and thrust their spears forward between the gap.

However, the spearheads did not touch Ellen or Mira. In a moment, their shields were crushed and their horses danced atop the enemy. Every time the wind flew from Ellen's sword, blood and brains painted the ground, only to be frozen shortly after as Mira thrust her spear into the earth.

Although three or four Thenardier soldiers challenged them with spears and swords, they were eliminated immediately by a counterattack. They saw the beautiful Goddess of death right before their eyes.

As if tearing through ragged clothes, the Zhcted Army divided the Thenardier Army in two equal portions. Those who fought back bravely could not last, as the cavalry ran by them with spear in hand.

"... Reinforcements."

After breaking through the enemy, Ellen frowned. There was a change in the enemy; a fresh unit was likely moved in.

They wore sturdy armor with thick shields. Between the gaps, they used a weapon which combined an axe with a polearm, a halberd.

The halberd was used to handle enemies on horseback. Though it was like a small axe, there was a projected tip which acted as a spearhead. The weapon could pierce, cut, and act as a hook to drag the enemy off his steed.

The disadvantage was how difficult it was to handle as well as its length and weight.

Though three kinds of attacks were possible, for those who could not properly use them, it still acted as a spear. Thenardier arranged it so the unit could use the weapon in that manner.

“But don't think this is enough against us.”

“--- Yes. I must say the same.”

Next to Ellen, who had just used a plural form of language, Mira added her words with a sarcastic tone. The bright red pupils and brilliant blue pupils crossed for a moment, letting off a spark of hostility.

In fact, the soldiers with the halberds could not stop Ellen or Mira. If they used the weapon as an axe, the handle was quickly severed. If they used the weapon as a spear, the cold air stopped their movements.

“Once we break through here, we'll see the Dragons.”

“What are the colors of the Dragon's scales?”

“Nothing black.”

Ellen returned a short reply to Mira's question. In Zhcted, young Dragons and Dragons with black scales were not to be killed due to their importance in the mythology of the founding of Zhcted. It was common sense to the two.

Soon, the five behemoths came into view.

Three had scales the color of yellow ochre, and another had red-brown scales reminiscent of brick.

The last, and most conspicuous, was the color of iron. Though it had shades of black along it, they were simply large chains fitted to the Dragon.

“This is my first time seeing a <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon...”

Mira muttered in disgust. Though Ellen did not say it, she agreed.

The <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon was a malformation and was an ill omen in Zhcted. Though they did not know what might happen, it was not simply an issue of nerves.

Ellen had one thing to be nervous about.

--- *The Fire Drake and the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon aren't being sealed with*

*those chains. In the first place, there is no chain which can restrain a Dragon, so what is that...?*

“How did they get them? Even in our country there are no examples... What kind of hand did they play?”

“I can't say I'm not interested, but it certainly won't be anything decent.”

At that moment, the two Vanadis heard an odd sound which resembled tinnitus. The two frowned and exchanged glances, but they had no room to speak.

After they broke through the wall of enemy soldiers, dozens of alsin away, the Dragons let out a roar. All six cries drowned out the sound of battle. Man and horse, enemy and ally alike simply stood still in terror.

Ellen and Mira lightly bent backwards. Their horses did not run forward; their bodies were trembling as they snorted in fear.

A wind blew, originating from the Dragons' breath, and blew a foul odor across the field. At that moment, the three <sup>Suro</sup>Earth Dragons with ochre scales began to move.

The Dragons ignored enemy and ally alike as they advanced. Their thick, tough forelimbs struck the ground like pillars. A Thenardier soldier was unable to escape and was crushed underfoot, leaving only a lump of dark, red flesh.

The Thenardier soldiers escaped to the side to avoid being killed by its rampage. They pushed one another as the three <sup>Suro</sup>Earth Dragons rushed straight ahead. The ground shook with every step, clouds of dust and blood swelled.

“--- To save time, we'll finish them off together.”

“True. There are five. It would not do to fight them individually.”

Even with the huge beasts approaching them, Ellen and Mira remained calm. A swirl of wind gathered at the tip of the longsword held by the Vanadis of silver-white hair. A cold air formed along the short spear held by Mira.

It was no lie that they lacked the time. If they took too much time against the Dragons here, Duke Thenardier would have time to escape; however, Ellen had

a separate aim.

So long as the Thenardier and Ganelon Armies fought, these Dragons would be a war potential difficult to surpass. The soldiers of Thenardier knew this.

She wanted to crush their morale by dealing with the Dragons in a single blow.

The wind formed an invisible blade, and crystals emerged in the air.

The Dragons approached the Vanadis.

“ <sup>Lev Admos</sup> Cleave the Air!”

“ <sup>Shero Zam Kafa</sup> Freeze the Sky!”

Ellen swing Arifal down, while Mira thrust Lavia forward. The two <sup>Viralt</sup> Dragonic Tools crossed. A whirlwind of ice shot forward as the cold stuck to the blade of wind.

It was as strong as a winter storm which occasionally blew violently in the northernmost lands of Zhcted. The torrent gouged the ground and altered the atmosphere. The Dragons bathed in the shining blade were bound in ice, unable to escape.

The Dragon scales were covered in countless cuts which were immediately frozen as they burst. The ocher scales crumbled like withered petals, dark red blood seeped from the Dragons before freezing.

Their claws and fangs were carved away by the wind and frozen; they shattered with a single strike.

The soldiers of the Thenardier Army who had escaped from the Dragon were hit by the shock wave. They were unable to escape the aftereffects and were frozen to the spot, unable to move their bodies.

The three <sup>Suro</sup> Earth Dragons, without letting out a cry, fell to the earth frozen. The Thenardier soldiers could not let out a single sound, some were unable to stand.

Ellen and Mira did not bother to claim victory. They pulled on their horses' reins and rushed past the Dragons' corpses.

“... Can you do it again?”

“Surely you are not asking me that?”

While retorting with a rare smile, the two Vanadis continued forward, followed by the Zhcted Army who raised a battle cry. On the other hand, the Thenardier soldiers were unable to move, barely able to hold a weapon in their trembling hands.

In the main force, the dark-haired Duke watched the battle with a grim expression.



--- *So that's the power of the Vanadis*

Though he was astonished, his face showed no sign of it. He and his aide, Steid, maintained their complexion, allowing the remaining staff officers to recover.

“Like I thought, our central unit should use a Four Spears Formation.”

Steid muttered as usual, despite his slightly pale face. The Four Spears Formation was something Duke Thenardier devised for the infantry. Its results were unsurpassed in battles thus far.

He did not use it because the Dragons were used to lure the Vanadis in. If the Vanadis were superior to the Dragons, they would take care of the Dragons first.

Strictly speaking, a thin layer of troops was placed behind the Dragons, and once the Vanadis passed the five Dragons, they would be engulfed in soldiers. So long as the Vanadis could be crushed, he was willing to lose all five Dragons.

However, because the Dragons were between his base and the central unit, the instructions could not easily be given, so the Four Spears Formation could not be readily used due to a necessity for quick command.

If the Vanadis were lost, the Zhcted Army was sure to collapse, and a remarkable change in morale would happen in both friend and foe. With numbers on his side, his chance of victory would skyrocket.

However, Thenardier and Steid had to quickly modify the plan. They were not sure what the two Vanadis had done, but they had quickly dispatched all three <sup>Su</sup>Earth Dragons.

“Quickly reorganize the troops. Enclose the Vanadis that defeated the Dragon and crush them.”

His words were filled with fatigue.

“I don't care if it takes six thousand soldiers to attack two people. Kill them.”

Thenardier gave out cold instructions without mercy.

Mira and Ellen approached the remaining two Dragons. They had quickly passed

the three Earth Dragons they defeated and divided to the left and right to fight the Fire Drake and Double Headed Dragon respectively.

Because of the Double Headed Dragon's bulk and the Fire Drake's ability to spit fire, they separated the two so they could fight in a large space.

"I'll leave the left to you."

Both Ellen and Mira advanced after that short phrase. Ellen ran to the Double Headed Dragon while Mira moved to the Fire Drake.

"We took out those Earth Dragons before, so I would rather not play with you, but we need you to leave the war right now."

As she said that, a sound rung in the depths of her ear yet again. It was a sharp noise which drowned out the clamor of the battlefield.

However, there was no room to think about it.

The Double Headed Dragon raised its head and glared at Ellen with its four eyes. Its eyes showed it had energy to spare.

The atmosphere let out a hum as a tornado surrounded Arifal, forming a blade of wind.

"Cleave the Wind!"

With a shout, Ellen struck the Double Headed Dragon. Though it was tough, its bones would break and not even a fragment would remain if it took a direct blow.

However, while the earth was gouged out as the wind tore through the air, it stopped shortly before the Double Headed Dragon, as if it were protected by an invisible wall. After the two struggled, the wind disappeared.

"... What?"

It was something Ellen had not expected at all. She looked on in blank surprise, though only for a single breath.

After a time which was not even a moment, the Vanadis wielded Arifal once again.

"--- Shadow Wind."

Removing her feet from the stirrups, she jumped up as soon as <sup>Gara Dova</sup> the Double Headed Dragon attacked. It bit through the horse's neck and backside. A deep, slow sound rumbled from its maw as blood sprinkled to the ground.

Both the Zhcted soldiers and the Thenardier soldiers turned pale, their bodies quaking in fear. Though Thenardier's central force was still clashing <sup>Unstoppable Sil</sup> with the [Silver Meteor Army]'s main force, those in the surroundings had forgotten the battle.

Ellen escaped from the Dragon's jaws and landed on the ground. <sup>Gara Dova</sup> The Double Headed Dragon closely observed her. After she had used [Shadow Wind] to escape, she attacked the Dragon's head, but there was no sign of any wound.

*--- Even if it was a shallow blow, it was not damaged by Arifal's blade.*

The <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake turned its gaze to Mira who had run to challenge it.

At that moment, Mira attacked the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake with her <sup>Veda</sup> Dragonic Skill.

“ <sup>Shero Zam Kafa</sup> Freeze the Sky!”

A huge amount of cold air was emitted from Mira's Frozen Wave. In a single moment, innumerable pillars of ice formed about the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake, stabbing it.

However, like Ellen, the Dragonic Skill was stopped by something, as if hampered. The <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake opened its mouth, a bud of flame shining from the back of its black throat.

Ellen and Mira ran quickly and rolled on the ground, colliding into one another.

Immediately afterward, an inferno was expelled from the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake's mouth, melting the ice created by Mira. The heat burned Ellen's back and shoulders. If she had been exposed to the flame directly, her body would have been carbonized immediately.

*--- Somehow, it missed for now...*

Because the two were fighting Dragons separately, they had created a considerable distance between them. Even with the speed of Shadow Wind, however, she was barely able to avoid the flame.

“Eleanora! Why are you...”

Mira glared in fright at Ellen who protected her from the fire. Ellen raised her face and smiled, enduring her pain.

“You... weren't acting like a Vanadis. Your movements were thrown out of order for a moment.”

“Silence.”

Using her spear, Mira emitted a thin film of ice to cover Ellen's wound. The <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake continued to vomit flames toward the two.

The bright red flame wrapped about the two Vanadis and spread radially like a lotus, engulfing many Zhcted soldiers. Those touched by the flame died instantly, their bodies carbonizing and collapsing to the grass as ashes.

The Zhcted soldiers not harmed by the flames looked toward their Lords engulfed in fire with bitter expressions. Even the Thenardier soldiers were not in a state of mind to cry for joy as they stared at the fire breathing Dragon.

“--- I see.”

A dignified, stony voice was heard from beneath the flames. A cold wind brewed from within the fires, dispersing the heat. The people looked on in disbelief, as if they had seen a dream or illusion. It was a miraculous scene beyond the reality they knew.

Mira held her spear of ice with a firm expression as Ellen protected her. A huge amount of cold emitted from Lavias, and Arifal had formed many films of air about them. They were protected from smoke, heat, and flames.

“Our <sup>Veda</sup> Dragonic Skills do not work on you.”

The Vanadis were safe. When faced with the flames of a <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake, all turned to ash without exception; however, these two people remained uninjured. It was a mystery to the beast.

On the other hand, Mira had formed large lumps of ice as she looked up at the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake. She was calmly constructing a method to kill it in her head. Still, nothing appeared in her mind.

The earth shook; the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon looked elsewhere. Even Mira

found it difficult to keep focus on the Dragon with twin heads upon which her Dragonic Skill would not work.

The stampede of thousands of horses approached with a tremendous force, corpses were trampled upon, soldiers were separated, and screams mixed in the air. It was the sound of war.

The Thenardier soldiers were split apart as cavalrymen, led by Lim, cut through them.

“Eleanora-sama, Ludmira-sama. Are you safe?”

Lavias was pointed to the ground, as Mira was about to thrust her spear into the earth. She stopped her movements in reaction to the shout and turned back to see Lim.

“You... Why are you here? What of Tigre?”

“I have come at Lord Tigrevurmud's instructions. He said to assist with your withdrawal---”

While Lim was answering, Mira noticed Ellen begin to fall before her.

“Help Eleanora. She is injured.”

Before Mira's words were finished, Ellen's body moved. Supporting herself with her sword, the Vanadis with silver-white hair struggled to stand.

“My body hurts... but I can manage myself.”

“Please get behind me.”

Ellen rode the horse behind Lim. After making sure Ellen was on, Mira deprived an enemy of his horse as she watched the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake approach.

“ <sup>Shero Zam Kafa</sup> Freeze the Sky!”

Mira used her <sup>Veda</sup> Dragonic Skill for a third time. The earth was torn away, and a large pillar of ice spread, forming a wall of ice to prevent the Dragon's flames.

The <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake fiercely hurled fire at the wall of ice, two, three times. The earth shook with every blow. Soon, the barrier of ice shattered, scattering fragments of ice across the battlefield.

However, by that time, every soldier from Zhcted had withdrawn.

Duke Thenardier and his adjutant, Steid, calmly looked at the soldiers of their army. There was a succession of surprises but their complexion remained unchanged.

“... They got us.”

Duke Thenardier vomited words in annoyance. Though the surrounding attendants trembled, Steid responded indifferently.

“It was a severe loss with the three Dragons.”

“Certainly that is true, but I did not grasp their movements.”

Without hiding anything, Thenardier strongly grasped his fist. He had pulled the soldiers back to lure Ellen and the others in so he could show his superiority.

“Have the Dragons attack the enemy. We will throw our men at the Vanadis.”

It was the second time Thenardier had to change the actions of his soldiers and the Dragons in this battle because he had too little information on the Vanadis. Furthermore, because of the Dragons, his soldiers had not moved as instructed. It was unpleasant for Thenardier.

His left wing was partially destroyed, and the three Earth Dragons had been destroyed, yet the Vanadis were not killed.

“What of the center and the right wing?”

“The right wing is holding its ground, and the center is pushing forward.”

Steid answered promptly. The situation was as expected. With the Knights in the enemy's left wing, it was unlikely they would destroy it, and their central force of ten thousand faced off against the enemy's seven thousand troops.

“However... That has ended as well.”

When Tigre sent Lim away, he awaited a report as he was tormented with anxiety and impatience.

*--- There's nothing to worry about. Ellen easily killed the Dragon when we*

*fought against Zaien. She has Mira with her this time.*

Even if he said that to himself, he could not dispel the worries in his mind. He recalled the fear he had when he confronted a Dragon before.

However, he could do nothing more than send Lim out. He could not just focus on them as the General of the army.

For the time being, it was necessary to overcome the situation of the central forces, since they were outnumbered.

“Lord Massas, do you have any ideas?”

“It's difficult... We are short three thousand troops. We have done well considering that deficit. All we can do now is to believe in the Zhcted Army.”

The old Earl's response was gloomy. Ellen and the others would break through the enemy's left wing and head toward the central unit, attacking them from behind.

If they succeeded, the enemy would lose its momentum. That would be a good chance for the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army]. Thinking of the abilities of Ellen, Mira, and the Zhcted Army, it was a feasible plan.

--- *Change... Change.*

He grasped his black bow and clenched his teeth. As the General, he was forced to watch from behind. It was painful.

Something changed at that time.

Hearing the cry of [Betrayal], Tigre and Massas understood. A traitor had appeared at the front of the central unit.

“--- Lord Massas. I leave it to you.”

Tigre gripped his black bow. He had confirmed the condition of his bow and the number of arrows many times already.

“... What do you intend to do?”

Massas asked with his usual tone, though his face was pale.

“I won't do anything unreasonable. I will meet them, that is all. I leave command and Her Highness to you.”

In his voice was a powerful presence. Though words rose to stop him, Massas said something different. He called his subordinate and ordered him to follow Tigre.

“Don't die. Got it? You must not die.”

Tigre responded by holding his bow up and jumping on a horse. The situation was urgent. The ~~Unstoppable Silver Flow~~ [Silver Meteor Army] could collapse in an instant. Agitation was already running through his soldiers.

*--- Can I get through?*

The central unit was a mixture of the former Ganelon Army. When they surrendered to them, there was already a high possibility that this would happen. Though Tigre and Massas investigated them as much as possible, there was a limit given the short time.

Tigre waded through the waves of soldiers as he nocked an arrow. A man of approximately 30 years moved toward Tigre after locating him. He was an impressive man with a thin mustache beneath his nose, and he held a shield and mace in his hands.

*--- I think he's Baron Digne.*

In the Brune Kingdom, barons were not given territory or titles. They received a yearly salary from the Kingdom and had to make the rest of their livelihoods on their own. Because they usually had aristocratic relatives, they were often entrusted with governing towns and villages.

However, Simon Digne was only interested in traveling and training himself. Since he had a presence of mind in the face of adversity, and his talent was a certainty, Tigre entrusted him with five hundred soldiers at Massas' recommendation.

“Why are you here, General?”

“Who called out traitor?”

He did not answer Digne's question and simply asked his question. Digne's eyes probed Tigre with an indistinct light before he responded.

“It was Viscounts Chateauroux and Batan. They suddenly shouted [We

support Duke Thenardier]..."

"Thank you for meeting me and answering my question."

After expressing his gratitude, Tigre moved ahead to look for Chateauroux and Batan. Tigre remembered their faces from the interview when they offered their troops. Though it was tedious, Massas and Lim made absolutely sure he memorized their appearance.

*-- I didn't want to use it for this.*

As he looked for them, he pulled his bow back strongly and shot an arrow. The arrow flew overhead at great speeds and pierced through Viscount Chateauroux who stood up with a sword a moment before.

He did not watch Chateauroux topple to the ground. He turned around as he pulled out another arrow. As expected, the old man who had served by his side for many years was present. After a nod, Batran clutched his spear, and turned to the soldiers.

"Louder! Drown everything else out!"

Batran shouted loudly beyond what one would expect of his small body. The soldiers, with Tigre's consent, raised their swords and spears and let out a battle cry. Against this backdrop, Tigre searched for Batan with his bowstring drawn to its limit.

He found Batan immediately, but he was running away with those from the Thenardier Army who were fleeing from battle. He was barely within visible range, but Tigre would not let him go.

In this case, Tigre's concentration was heightened by anger, excitement, and tension. He had nocked three arrows and drew his bowstring back, then fired and killed three Thenardier soldiers standing in a line. While the bowstring was still trembling, Tigre had nocked his bow and fired yet again.

When Batan's body fell to the ground, a strange silence fell on the battlefield. Batan and Chateauroux's soldiers who had just betrayed them stood rooted to the spot. Both the soldiers of the [Silver Meteor Army] and the Thenardier Army stared wide eyed at Tigre's feat of skill.

Tigre rode forward proudly and shouted to his soldiers.

"Stand your ground! If we retreat here, we will gain nothing! Show me what you men are here for!"

He nocked another arrow and targeted the nearest Commander. Though two hundred alsin away he understood it was a Thenardier Commander based on his uniform.

Following the sound of the wind being cut was a dry sound of flesh being gouged away. The man was one who commanded hundreds of soldiers, although he was not necessarily occupying an important location.

However, it changed the atmosphere of the battlefield. Batran's men gave a battle cry once again, encouraging themselves and recovering their energy.

The ~~Unstoppable Silver Flow~~ [Silver Meteor Army] which was on the verge of collapse held their ground, took one step forward, and clutched their swords and spears soaked in blood. They charged toward Thenardier's soldiers on the hill, swallowing Chateauroux and Batan's men in an instant.

With the General in the center of the battlefield, morale would surely increase. Their blistering counter-offensive overturned their preceding inferiority; however, the Thenardier soldiers resisted stubbornly, blocking with their shields, thrusting their spears forward, and some even threw stones.

Though Tigre did not move from the midst of the battlefield, he was unable to show his normal skills with the bow.

There were no soldiers as capable as Ellen and Mira who had once defended him. His escorts fell, one after another. With swords and spears coming at him, Tigre had no choice but to concentrate on evasion.

Lacerations marked Tigre's arms and legs, his clothes were dyed red. Many soldiers fell defending Tigre.

When the sun reached its zenith, the Thenardier Army slowly began to retreat. They were not being pushed back by the strength of the ~~Unstoppable Silver Flow~~ [Silver Meteor Army]. It was an order to retreat.

*--- This is a temporary retreat. I should also quickly reorganize...*

Tigre looked up at the winter sun and ruffled his dull red hair with a sigh.

They took short shifts to rest. Wounds were treated and soldiers with severe injuries were pulled away from the battlefield. Food and arms were replenished, and water was distributed. No alcohol was passed around, because their bleeding would worsen, and there was still an intense battle coming afterward.

They ate thin, hard bread and some roasted vegetables. There was neither meat nor fish. Rather than recovering the soldiers' physical condition, it instigated their desire to win and survive.

While maintaining the tension of the battlefield, the soldiers devoured their food and drank their water.

Though Tigre went to meet Ellen and the others who had returned, he could not be happy upon seeing their injuries and rough breathing. Mira's fatigue could not be hidden, and Lim was supporting Ellen who had a burn down her back.

“I'm sorry. We only managed to kill the <sup>Suro</sup>Earth Dragons.”

While the Vanadis with silver-white hair did not meet him with a smile, she spoke with a bright voice

Tigre entrusted the reorganization to Massas and asked for the details from Ellen. There was no time to set up a tent, so the soldiers surrounded them as they held their meeting.

Though they had killed three Dragons, the <sup>Prani</sup>Fire Drake and <sup>Gara Dova</sup>Double Headed Dragon had unexpectedly remained. On the other hand, the Vanadis' faces clouded over after hearing the situation with the central troops.

“You were the one who told us not to overdo it.”

Ellen gazed painfully at the injuries on Tigre's arms and legs. Tigre had taken his clothes off and was being treated by Teita.

“That's true, but given the situation, it was the only hand I could play...”

Mira also looked at Tigre with both blame and concern in her eyes. Lim also showed her concern.

"Lord Tigrevurmud. I must ask that you do not concern yourself with this battle."

Hearing her calm voice, Ellen and Mira collected themselves at once. Tigre was thankful for Lim's words in his mind. She looked down at him less coldly than usual.

"I will tell you this now. This conversation is only postponed for now."

It meant she would scold him whenever she had time. Though he repented, he regretted leaving reorganization of the troops to Massas. Tigre meekly surrendered with a shrug.

"By the way, why didn't your <sup>Veda</sup> Dragonic Skill work on them?"

Mira held her hand to her hip and tilted her head. Ellen was the one to answer.

"Perhaps the chains anchoring those Dragons are blocking them."

"It was negated?"

Mira looked at Ellen with eyes of suspicion and anger.

"I'll say this beforehand. It is possible to cancel a Dragonic Skill."

"Unfortunately, I did not know this."

Ellen's eyes turned to Tigre.

"The holy sword Durandal belonging to Brune Kingdom exerted a mysterious force which counteracted my Dragonic Skill. Sophie's as well."

In the fight against the Black Knight Rolland who led the Navarre Knights, it had happened. Even if he received an attack from a <sup>Viralt</sup> Dragonic Tool, or even an attack from Tigre's bow, Durandal remained unscathed.

"There's no telling what it was made of, but the sword was made from some metal which was unearthed. It wouldn't be surprising if they could forge chains as well."

Ellen could calmly think and speak this far because it was her second experience with it; however, Mira's reaction could not be helped.

"If what you say is true, it will be a nuisance..."

Mira let out a groan from the bottom of her heart.

Though they were called Vanadis, their bodies were flesh and blood. Their bodies would not hold their original form and would be corpses if they took an attack from a Dragon's claw.

"We have two options."

Ellen spoke with a confident smile.

"Say it quickly. Time is more precious than gold right now."

"What Ludmira-sama says is reasonable, Eleanora-sama."

As Ellen was reproached from two directions, she looked for help. Tigre simply shook his head, and Teita tilted hers in doubt as she continued rolling bandages. Ellen sighed.

"No matter. We can try and cut the chain directly. Though I don't know what it's made of, our Dragonic Skill will work without it there. If that's impossible, then we'll aim directly for the Dragon. Though they're unexpectedly tough, they'll likely take some damage if they're hit with my Silver Flash or your Frozen Wave."

"And the second method?"

"We kill the guy controlling the Dragons."

Ellen smiled fearlessly.

"When I approached the Dragon, I heard a strange sound many times. It's probably someone giving a command to the Dragon. I could see no other signs of commands being issued."

Lim agreed as well. She did not recall seeing anyone nearby or riding the Dragon to issue commands.

Nevertheless, the Dragons did not move until the Zhcted Army reached them. Furthermore, they attacked the Thenardier soldiers as well.

"While the Dragon is fighting others, I'll use Arifal to search for the sound and take care of the one making it. When it becomes impossible to control the Dragons, they won't use them. Like this, we---"

Ellen suddenly glared at Tigre as if she remembered something.

“If you have the time to think about that, then think of a way to fight the enemy forces.”

She preemptively stopped Tigre from speaking.

“Right. Leave the Dragons to us. You should concentrate on Duke Thenardier.”

Mira also teased him. Ellen further raised the bar.

“Tigre. You are the General. It isn't a role Lim or I can take. I doubt Massas or Regin could do it, either.”

If Ellen and Mira, who were from a foreign nation, became the General, the soldiers of Brune would not follow them. Though Massas had dignity, he had no authority, and Regin's position was too unstable.

“--- I understand.”

Tigre nodded. He would do it for Ellen and Mira, Lim, Massas, Batran, Teita, Rurick, and Gerard. He would accomplish his task.

*--- It's still a difficult problem.*

Based on the previous battle, Thenardier would adopt a new strategy. It was necessary for him to outsmart Thenardier, who had lived twice as long as Tigre had.

“Then...I will start preparations.”

Lim took out a map with a somewhat theatrical tone and gesture. Realizing she was trying to relax in her own way, Tigre simply nodded with a smile.

“I'm counting on you.”

After two koku, the armies confronted each other once again. The sun had fallen far to the west, and the clouds would soon dye vermillion.

Duke Thenardier's army was down to twenty thousand. The dead and severely injured numbered two thousand in total, but those with slight injuries were moved to the back as well. Though the right and left wings had not

changed significantly, the center was thin.

The all important Dragons were behind the central force, and Duke Thenardier was further behind.

On the other hand, the [Silver Meteor Army] had at most sixteen thousand men; however, those with slight injuries were made to remain on the battlefield. Their morale was high. Tigre had punished the traitors on the battlefield, and every time his bowstring sounded, another enemy was felled.

It was not only the numbers that differed.

The [Silver Meteor Army] had retreated significantly. The left wing remained on the hill, and the central force had a column formation at the base of the hill.

The central unit was not well equipped.

Those with leather armor were more prominent, those with spears did not have swords at their waist, and those with swords lacked a shield. They were terribly unbalanced, and every weapon was damaged in some way.

“... What do you think the enemy intends to do?”

Thenardier received the scout's report and asked his adjutant, Steid. Though the same question was thrown to the remaining staff officers, but they were satisfied with thinking the enemy did not have a sufficient amount of equipment because an Earl from the country could not supply them. He did not receive a satisfactory answer.

“The Knights will descend from the left.”

The Knights had mobility and a strong rushing power. They could apply an intense charge to come to the aid of their allies as they watched the battlefield from the top of the hill.

“If that is the case, why not place the Zhcted Army on the hill?”

“The Zhcted Army is strong as it is. They will fight either the right or left wing early on and retreat before we can use the Dragons.”

“What of the equipment of their main unit?”

Steid did not immediately answer, trying to draw a conclusion he could be convinced of.

"I doubt they were unable to procure enough arms. It's possible..."

The fair-haired, blue-eyed adjutant continued to speak.

"To avoid a fight with the Dragon, it is best to create a situation where friend and foe is confused. Their will to fight has been stimulated, so it will likely become a melee."

Thenardier folded his thick arms and gave thought to what Steid said. He considered it likely, since the enemy was clearly preparing to attack aggressively. It was simply a show, since they would quickly retreat to avoid the Dragons. He had also thought that far.

Once again, he looked at the enemy camp in the distance.

*--- He's buying time by creating a dogfight in the center while the left and right wings are attacked. He'll have his men retreat to escape from the Dragon. Is he going to approach me?*

He did not believe Tigre would retreat because he was a coward, and he did not accept that Tigre was unable to procure weaponry. He was an enemy and the fastest growing power. Half a year ago, he had led only one hundred soldiers. He would have a plan to win.

"I got it. We'll move according to this plan."

The wind had grown cold and the clouds became thicker.

It was the second battle of the day. Rather than a battle cry, it was a trumpet which sounded from the central unit of the Thenardier Army that marked the start of the conflict.

The Thenardier Army showed strange movements. Some moved to the right or the left quickly, while others slipped behind their allies.

A wide road was open between the two wings of the Thenardier Army. It was wide enough for the Dragons to easily pass through.

A strange sound, like that of a flute, echoed through the battlefield. Though it

did not reach the ears of half the people, those who did hear it frowned in pain.

However, thoughts of the sound was blown away from the soldiers who had heard it with the appearance of the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake and <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon, as the two rushed quickly through the path made by the Thenardier Army.

*--- So this is how they're playing it...!*

Behind their central force, a loud cry was heard. Tigre stared at the two mountainous behemoths as they approached.

*How is it possible to use a Dragon?* Though Tigre desperately thought about it, he could only think of two methods.

One was to bring them at the beginning of battle and force it into the enemy camp. The other was to use it as a reserve power for the end of the battle.

There was actually a third method. In the first battle, the Dragons were placed behind the main unit to act as a decoy since the Vanadis were an existence which could fight a Dragon. They would be lured in and surrounded. It was a cunning plan, because, even if there were no means to defeat the Dragons, the Vanadis would still be forced to jump into the trap.

*--- However, the plan Ellen and Mira are carrying out is dangerous.*

Ellen and Mira certainly defeated the <sup>Suro</sup> Earth Dragons, but they could not handle the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake or <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon.

He did miss this. Thenardier had seen what happened in the first battle and thought of a different plan.

*--- He'll have thought of another plan, since he knows Ellen and Mira's attacks won't work against the Dragon.*

Because he knew that, he would choose one of the other two options.

Massas believed he would not act conservatively.

"It is true he still has the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon and <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake, but he lost the three <sup>Suro</sup> Earth Dragons. To ease the fears of the soldiers, he will bring the Dragons out early in battle. He will likely attack the troops from the Ganelon Army."

“I agree with Lord Massas. From the previous battle, it is clear it is difficult to use the Dragons when ally and enemy are mixed.”

Lim spoke up as well. Based on the two opinions, Tigre conceived counter-measures. It was a dangerous gamble, but to trick a powerful man like Duke Thenardier, it was unavoidable.

“Retreat!”

The moment he saw the Dragons, Tigre shouted. Massas and Lim, rather than giving orders, remained indifferent and calm.

The central unit of the [Silver Meteor Army] began to retreat at a pace which surprised the enemy. It was disorderly. They ignored formation and rank in all forms, threw their weapons aside, discarded their helmets, and ran away desperately from the Dragon.

It was disgraceful conduct they did not expect from the enemy they had fought just a short time ago. The soldiers from the Thenardier Army could do nothing but stare in blank surprise. The Dragon chased after the

[Silver Meteor Army] as ordered. Dozens who could not run away were bathed in flames or devoured by the two heads.

Some soldiers fell, their every bone shattering as the Dragon walked over them. Some had their torsos blown away with a graze of the claws.

If their breathing was off a little or if they stumbled slightly, a horrific death awaited them.

Hundreds of alsin away, a group, lead by a fierce shadow, galloped fiercely toward the center. The wind roared with the sword, and cold air drifted from the spear.

Having knowledge of the enemy's existence, the Dragons stopped their advance for the first time.

“All right, they stopped. Now to discipline it properly.”

The girl with silver-white hair calmly got off her horse and held her blade to her shoulder. She was smiling.

“The sound reaches even out there. I suppose it does not matter. We will drag

him out eventually."

On the side opposite the Dragons was a girl with a spear. She dismounted her horse and looked up.

Ellen and Mira; the two Vanadis.

Further away, the [Unstoppable Silver Flow Silver Meteor Army] had retreated. The two now stood in a field littered with innumerable arms. They silently waited for signs that their troops had completely retreated.

The two ranks, a distance away, gathered together. They recovered their breathing, took up new arms, and reorganized their formation. One group was led by Tigre while the other was led by Massas.

"Lord Massas. May the fortunes of war be with you."

Tigre and Massas shook hands.

"You as well. Limlisha, please do not let him act recklessly."

"I understand."

Lim nodded indifferently as she stood beside Tigre. The young man ran his hand through his dull red hair awkwardly to disguise his embarrassment. In place of the Vanadis, Tigre would help cover the right wing with the Zhcted Army, while Massas would help the troops on the hill to cover the left wing.

Suddenly, Tigre turned around and thought about what happened in the distance. He thought of the unreasonable battle being held by Ellen and Mira.

His face was tense, and he gripped his bow strongly. At that time, his back was struck lightly.

"Lord Tigrevurmud. It is time we leave."

It was Lim. Tigre returned from his thoughts and turned back. Though her facial expression and indifferent voice were as normal, it was rare for her to hit him on the back.

"If Eleanora-sama and Ludmira-sama cannot concentrate on their battles, they will scold you later."

"That's a bit rough... But you won't be scolding me?"

"Since my leadership would be insufficient, I would be scolded as well."

Her earnest words wiped all his hesitation and tension away.

Tigre braced himself and grasped the reins as he smiled at Lim.

"Thank you."

"I did what was natural as your adjutant."

"Is that so. Let's go, Limlisha-sensei."

Hearing his last word, which was spoken as a joke, Lim's face dyed red. Even without looking, it was easy for Tigre to tell what her reaction was. The young General raised a shout to his soldiers.

"We fight back!"

The fight between the Vanadis and the Dragons approached the end.

The Vanadis did not take the battle into a one-on-one fight. They fought the <sup>Prai</sup> Fire Drake, using it to shield them from the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon as it charged. It was a fight they were dominating.

"The Black Knight Roland was a much more frightening opponent---"

Ellen spoke to herself as she thrust her longsword into the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake's forelimbs. The sound of rocks being crushed sounded as her sword clad in wind smashed through its scales. Dark red blood immediately erupted and coagulated from its body heat, flowing like lava. It was a strange pattern.

The <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake gave a roar of anguish. It swiped outward with its foreleg and cleaved the ground with its tail; it sprayed its flames across the skies and the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> ground. It was a rampage forceful enough to make the Double Headed Dragon retreat a few steps.

However, its thick, sharp claws and tail as large as a tree trunk could easily mow down all in their path. The flames were dissipated by a wall of cold air.

"It was not Roland's capability as a soldier but his abnormal willpower that made him a difficult opponent. He would not be so strong if he only had the ability to block my <sup>Veda</sup> Dragonic Skill."

The Dragons were not a powerful enemy. Though the flames which could burn everything were terrible, it was blocked with the wind and the cold. Though her body ached from the burns, she did not lag behind at all.

However, the two were still at a stand still. Though they had found many opportunities to attack the chains, not a single scratch was left behind.

“It might be easier just to cut through the scales to kill it...”

Mira spoke up.

They had focused their attacks to the chain wrapping about the Dragon. After Ellen had used her wind to cut the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake with a series of quick attacks before taking distance, then Mira would move forward, gouging the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake deeply in its chest before it could use its flames.

Mira called out. At that moment, a wind was sent forth.

The small body of the blue-haired Vanadis danced in the air, her short spear in hand, as she jumped away from the danger of the flames.

It was a disappointing death; it was quiet. The flames did not come from the fang-lined furnace, nor did it leak out any death throes.

Its eyes were wide open, and the place it fell to was scorched as its body generated an intense heat. A small fire flickered from its mouth.

The two did not have room to relax with the death of the <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake. The <sup>Gara Dc</sup> Double Headed Dragon rushed toward them as its two heads let out an intense roar.

Its two jaws lined with fangs that could tear through iron and rock approached Ellen from either side. The pain from the burns in her back delayed Ellen's movements for a moment.

Though she barely dodged its fangs, they grazed Ellen's clothes. A laceration was carved into her fair skin. Her entire body was clad in a storm with frightening vigor as Ellen was thrown to the ground.

“Eleanora...!”

Mira ran up in a hurry and attacked the left neck of the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon. The right head attacked Ellen who was still on the

ground.

“Get away!”

A lance of ice shot from Mira as she screamed in anger, forcing the Dragon to bend its neck backward. While Ellen rolled along the ground to avoid it, Ellen thrust her sword forward. The Dragon's right head thrust into the ground, bringing up earth and sand in copious quantities.

Its left head moved violently as it groaned. Mira looked on in frustration, as the wound was smaller than she had anticipated.

“This is far harder than any <sup>Suro</sup> Earth Dragon or <sup>Prani</sup> Fire Drake...”

Mira cursed at the chain hanging from the neck of the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon.

“It will be a bit hard to get through that...”

Ellen skillfully took distance from the Dragon as she pulled some dirt from her silver-white hair. She called out for Mira.

“Ludmira. Help me.”

“Explain.”

Mira responded with a sharp tone. Ellen's smile reached her bright red eyes in surprise.

“You're quite honest.”

It was normal for her to not even bother listening to a request. The blue-haired Vanadis responded with a sarcastic smile.

“I expect a wonderful proposal. I will mock you for it later if it is terrible.”

Ellen moved close and whispered into Mira's ear. Though the Dragon likely could not understand human tongue, it was a battlefield and there was a need for caution. Sure enough, Mira's face distorted as she frowned reluctantly.

“You want to drop it into a pit you make in the ground, and you want me to close it off with ice.”

“There's no proof it will die. My idea certainly is weak, but I will kill it with this hand, with this sword. Do you have a better plan?”

Mira shook her head without responding, a sign of her agreement. Looking at the Double Headed Dragon, Ellen shouted.

“Arifal!”

Responding to its master's will, a pale blue light tinged its blade. Ellen's body was wrapped in a fierce wind, throwing sand up in the air. Ellen and Mira ran forward.

The Double Headed Dragon let out a roar and attacked, but Ellen was much faster. The sound of the wind and air bursting could be heard throughout the forest. The two jumped high into the air as its claws pierced the ground.

The Double Headed Dragon was surprised by the pain in its forelimb. It pulled its arm out of the ground and recovered its posture while Ellen and Mira looked down on it from the sky.

“Let's not argue at this height.”

Supported by the wind Ellen created, Mira brandished the Frozen Wave.

“ <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Shero Zam Kafa, Freeze the Sky!”

The spear of ice produced numerous crystals from the atmosphere which rained down on the Dragon.

The blocks of ice would blow a human body to pieces. Even so, the Double Headed Dragon received only a few scratches on its scales. Though it staggered, the Dragon held its ground and looked up at Mira, seeing a threat before it.

At that time, the Dragon noticed the other person was no longer in the sky.

Immediately afterward, the Double Headed Dragon felt something small pierce it from behind.

“I only needed a little momentum to get this into you.”

Ellen was on her knee on the back of the Double Headed Dragon. Her hair was dirty with mud, and her body was covered in wounds, but she still laughed fearlessly. The longsword clasped in both her hands had pierced deep inside its body through its thick scales, almost to the base.

With its strength exhausted, they could inflict damage to its scales.

Because it was tired today, they had been able to inflict damage to the Dragon's scale. If Ellen fired her <sup>Veda</sup> Dragonic Skill, it would simply be negated by the black chains.

Therefore, using the momentum from her fall, increased with Arifal's wind, Ellen moved toward the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon at a terrifying speed. The Dragon could not react because of the rain of ice Mira had created.

Though Ellen had pierced through the Dragon's scales, she was also injured due to its movements to the extent that she had momentarily lost consciousness. Still, the Vanadis of silver-white hair endured it all.

She took a deep breath and put power in her hands.

*--- If it's useless from the outside, then I'll attack from the inside.*

“ --- <sup>Ley Admos</sup> Cleave the Wind!”

A storm was born from Arifal's blade within the Dragon's body. Its meat was scooped out, its bones were crushed. Everything within the Dragon turned to powder.

A thick black liquid spilled from the mouths of the two heads. The <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon fell down, its body convulsing on the ground.

Ellen was thrown aside with Arifal from the momentum. The sword bathed its Lord in wind and gently brought her body to the earth. When the aid from her sword ended, Ellen, with her purpose of killing the <sup>Gara Dova</sup> Double Headed Dragon gone, fell to the ground.

“... Finally, it has ended.”

Mira walked to her with the Frozen Wave over her shoulder. Still, she was not the type to boast of her victory.

Before the corpses of the Dragons, fatigue wrapped about the two. They had the strength to cut through one thousand soldiers, but never had they felt so tired, both physically and mentally.

“Are you going to help Tigre and the others?”

"I'm in no state to help in this condition."

Ellen responded curtly.

The horses they rode had run away.

"We did what we needed to do. All we can do is leave it to Tigre to finish his task. Well, I suppose I could fight another one hundred cavalry if I need to."

"How weak. I can handle another one-hundred-fifty."

"... My mistake. Two hundred."

"Is that so. Then go. Walk."

In the end, the two could not stop moving until the battle had come to an end.

While Mira and Ellen waged battle against the Dragons, Tigre led the fierce attack on the outskirts of the battlefield. He had to get his men to rest and reorganize twice before they reached the Zhcted Army.

The Zhcted Army had been attacked from the front and the left by the enemy. In addition, half the troops from the enemy's central unit had begun to attack from the other side.

Though Rurick commanded them to remain on the defensive, they were nearing their limit. It was only a matter of time.

Tigre charged straight before stopping. The reason he took two stops was for this reason.

"Stones!"

When Tigre shouted, the infantry placed their weapons on the ground and threw the stones in their hands at the Thenardier Military. They had expected a charge, and so were unprepared for this incoming assault.

"He really is a country aristocrat. He's willing to use stones, he must have no sense of shame."

Even so, the enemy's offense was stopped with this. Their pace was thrown into disorder.

“So you came. I was waiting for you.”

Rurick smiled joyfully. He would not miss this opportunity to counterattack.

Tigre saw his movements, and, with Lim's assistance, charged fiercely behind the enemy.

The Thenardier Army which attacked the Zhcted Army from two directions was now being attacked from two directions themselves.

Furthermore, the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] was strong. Tigre's participation in battle increased their courage. In response, they fought boldly. As for Tigre, he shot down the enemy Commanders in one hit.

Even without a Commander, it would make no significant difference. Still, the appearance of the General with a black bow was enough to make the enemy falter, and the Zhcted soldiers let out a shout of victory with every arrow that pierced the enemy.

“<sup>Silvrash</sup> Star Shooter! <sup>Silvrash</sup> Star Shooter!”

The Zhcted soldiers used Muozinel's words of praise. Though it was strange to those from Brune, the Thenardier Army could only think of it as a curse of some kind. The soldiers quickly collapsed, turned about, and retreated.

On the other side, Massas rode to the rescue of the aristocrats and Knights of the left wing based on a plan formed by Auguste of the Calvados Knights. Auguste was a Knight born in Alsace, and he was an old friend of Massas, not to mention Tigre.

“I see... Something does seem strange.”

Massas accepted Auguste's proposal and sent orders to the top of the hill at once.

Soon after, the soldiers from the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] who had remained on the defense at the top of the hill descended at the same time and joined Massas' force.

“It's impossible to defend it any longer. Are you abandoning it?”

Thenardier Army had judged, based on Auguste's actions, that they would not leave the hill. They had sent two units to storm the hill, competing with each

other to see who would raise their banner at the top of the hill first.

The Thenardier Army restructured their formation at the top of the hill to attack the enemy below. Being above the enemy, their will to fight had been amplified.

As the Thenardier Army ran down the hill in a fierce charge, the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] at the base ordered a retreat. Their shields were held forward, not leaving a single gap. Massas ordered the soldiers to retreat while his men held them off with stones. The Thenardier Army thought the enemy had lost their nerve and were running in desperation.

Immediately afterward, a new change occurred. A battle cry was called from atop the hill.

The eyes of the Thenardier Army looked back and saw their allies, which had remained at the top, were being driven away by the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] which suddenly appeared.

“First abandon the hill, then attract their attention after they have taken it. Lord Auguste will go around the hill and occupy it once again when the enemy is thin.”

Massas muttered to himself as he watched the panic-stricken enemy. It was a plan Auguste proposed when he noticed the enemy disliked his advantage of elevation when defending the hill.

“We are Knights. It won't take us long to wrap around the hill, and the run will give us some energy.”

His insight was certain. Auguste made a detour and had gotten behind the enemy without them noticing. Their line had been unnecessarily thinned out from their attack against Massas, and now they had lost their ally at the top of the hill. Their movements were now limited.

After a half koku, the Thenardier Army was attacked from the front and the back and was dispersed. Some retreated immediately, while those who resisted eventually gave up. Their formation collapsed rapidly.

Massas did not give chase. The western sky was crimson, and, above all, his men were at the height of fatigue.

In this battle, Duke Thenardier lost 20% of his entire army as well as all his Dragons.

10% were killed in battle while 10% retreated and did not return. They either died or escaped.

The casualties of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] had not even reached one thousand.

## Chapter 3 - Interlude

The sound of water boiling and the crackling of fire mixed in the air.

Under the moonlight which shined beyond the thin clouds, the figure of many girls could be seen near the river.

There were four lights burning brightly by the riverside, heating pots filled with hot water. The girls used the cloths to wipe their bodies before bathing in the cold water of the river. There were five people: Ellen, Mira, Lim, Regin, and Teita.

Though the night air was still cold at the end of winter, it was blocked by Ellen's Arifal and Mira's Lavias.

Though in order for them to sustain the power for a long time, the five girls had to squeeze together. Ellen and Mira sat on a carpet of sheep skin by the riverside. Lim was right behind them, wiping her body with a wet cloth.

Regin sat with her hand to the fire closest to her. Teita was politely wiping her back. Since their conversation about Tigre in Perucche Castle, the Princess openly trusted and relied on Teita.

They were wrapped in darkness, the distant lights did not reach them. Though only one hundred alsin away, they could still hear the noise from the Unstoppable Silver Flow [Silver Meteor Army] encampment.

The battle with Duke Thenardier had finished, and the day had come to an end.

The Unstoppable Silver Flow [Silver Meteor Army] completed burying their dead and moved along the river to watch the enemy's movements. They decided their camp based on that.

Ellen had gathered only the women to have a bath. Though it was a luxury to have four fires, Tigre persuaded Gerard that it was worthwhile given their

current state and the army's victory.

Though Ellen and Mira thought it wasteful to cleanse themselves with hot water today, they obediently accepted Tigre's good will.

The river water was cold at night, so it was impossible to dive in. Ellen buried her face and her argent hair into the water before standing up. Her wet hair clung to her shoulders and her chest, and the water dripped down her skin.

Ellen let out a small breath. It was only at a time like this that she could feel comfortable.

“Eleanora-sama, are you fine?”

Lim was clearly worried about the burn from her shoulder down her back. Ellen laughed as she splashed about vigorously in the river.

“It'd be a lie if I said it didn't hurt, but it will recover after a few days if I put some medicine on it.”

Mira glanced at Ellen from the side with a poor expression. It was because Ellen protected Mira that she was burned.

“Anyway – Lim. Have your breasts gotten bigger again?”

“What are you saying that for, so suddenly!”

Lim was clearly frowning as she hid her chest with her arms. She noticed gazes pouring over her. When she turned around, Regin and Teita looked at her body curiously.

“Certainly... They are quite amazing.”

“She's tall and slender, so she's well balanced, too.”

They looked down at their own bodies. Regin had recently been a traveler, and Teita's body was forged from her usual work to not have any useless flesh. Still, their bodies clearly had effeminate curves.

However, the two still had a delicate appearance. Their bodies paled in comparison to Lim's.

Ellen twisted her waist and looked back, touching Lim's breast in the process. Lim pulled back on reflex. At the same time, Ellen let out a groan of pain and

crouched down.

“E, Eleanora-sama?”

Perhaps she had taken a posture which irritated her burn. Lim looked at Ellen with a face full of worry. Suddenly, the Vanadis with silver-white hair thrust her right hand out quickly and grasped the breast of her trusted, golden-haired aide.

“I can tell by touching it directly. I wonder if Tigre likes a bigger chest.”

“H, How would I know!”

The one to respond with a bullish tone and her tongue tied was Mira. Teita also agreed. Though silent, Ellen could clearly see that Regin was disappointed.

Lim was at a loss for words from Ellen's behavior. She recovered at once, though, and drove her fist quickly into Ellen's head.

“That is enough playing around.”

“Sorry, sorry. Well, I'm fine like this. You were worrying too much. Are you feeling better?”

Ellen waved gently with an unapologetic smile after seeing Lim sulk. Those words were directed toward both her subordinate and the blue-haired Vanadis. Mira turned away and let out a small noise.

When the women finished bathing, they returned to the camp. They headed to the Commander's tent. The smell of alcohol and milk coming from the camp grounds stimulated their appetite.

“Is this the smell of cheese? It seems a little different from the one we have in Zhcted.”

“In Brune, every village makes its own cheese, so there are many different varieties. That is what Massas-sama told me.”

Hearing Ellen murmur to herself, Teita responded. Regin also nodded in confirmation.

“Every village, is it? It might be an exaggeration, but there must be hundreds of different cheeses. They all have their own smell and taste... I've also eaten

many kinds."

They could not carry all their food. They bought meat, fish, cheese, and a variety of produce locally. Of course, they purchased it.

Fish, meat, potatoes, and cabbage were cooked in a pot. Some soldiers were beginning to eat, while others entertained themselves with gambling. Many had noticed Ellen and the others and were admiring their beauty.

They approached the General's tent with four flags, fluttering in the wind. After asking the guard, they learned Tigre was resting inside.

"If it is you, you may enter."

Though he said so, Ellen had already put one foot inside the tent before hearing the soldier's words. Under the light of the candles, the Vanadis with silver-white hair went wide-eyed.

Tigre was lying down on a blanket covering the ground, snoring.

"Eleanora-sama. How is Lord Tigrevurmud?"

Lim lifted the curtain and entered, followed by Mira, Teita, then Regin. Tigre showed no signs of knowing they were present.

"Um... We could let him sleep for a little."

"I'd like to, but it seems impossible right now."

Ellen shook her head toward Teita's conservative remark.

"I don't mean to be blunt, but we have only pushed the enemy back in this battle, we have not crushed them. We can't hold this off."

Ellen placed her hand on Teita's head as she gave an explanation. Lim and Mira looked as if they had seen something unusual. The Vanadis of the Silver Flash was not one to show such gentleness.

*I understand.* Teita looked downward, finally convinced.

"Now then, how should we wake this guy up. It can't be a normal method."

Hearing Ellen's words, Mira, Lim, and Teita understood immediately. Only Regin looked on vacantly.

“We can't shout too loudly because of the soldiers outside. Any ideas?”

Ellen looked back at the four for an idea. Regin asked Teita from the side.

“Teita, what are they planning to do to wake him up?”

“There are a few ways... Like spinning him on the blanket.”

Teita answered in embarrassment. Mira asked a question from the other side.

“Can we block his nose and mouth? He should wake up at once.”

“That... Please do not be so violent.”

“You, didn't you put your sword in his mouth before?”

Ellen teased Lim. Her adjutant's face turned away quickly. Even with all the noise, Tigre's snoring did not stop.

“--- I have an idea. I'll give this a try.”

Having thought of something, Ellen sheathed her sword and entrusted it to Lim. She walked over to Tigre who was sprawled out. She placed her knees and hands on both sides of Tigre and hunched over, covering him.

She looked down at Tigre who was breathing deeply with an innocent face. Her face became fierce, and an abnormal thirst for blood could be seen in her eyes.



In that moment, Tigre's body vigorously jumped up. Though she was watching him, Ellen could not react to his strength and speed.

Tigre had pinned her down in a single moment. His right hand was on her breast and his left hand had reached for the dagger at his waist. It was not just Ellen but the other girls who watched the scene with wide eyes.

Tigre became aware of his surroundings when the blood lust disappeared. With an opponent who was not resisting, he noticed the strange atmosphere in the tent.

Beneath him, Ellen gazed at him with surprise and amusement. There was a soft feeling permeating his right hand. It had a splendid elasticity, and his fingers could move comfortably.

“Come to think of it, you pushed me down and massaged my breast long ago as well, didn't you?”

Hearing her voice which sounded both amused and happy, Tigre quickly retreated from Ellen. He fell over in a panic and finally noticed Lim and the others.

Mira looked down at him with shock, Lim covered her face with her hand as if she regretted some disgrace, and Teita and Regin blinked repeatedly, unable to understand the situation.

“... Copping a feel is a pretty bad way to start.”

As soon as he heard an explanation, Tigre lifted his arm and brought his hand to his head. While playing with his hair, Ellen laughed.

“Well, I'll admit that was pretty bad. You managed to push me down and touch me.”

“You are only suffering the consequences of your actions, Eleanora-sama.”

Lim spoke harshly as she folded the blanket and put it away in the corner of the tent. Teita was preparing a meal for everyone while Regin was helping her.

“What's this, Lim. You're not siding with me?”

“I wonder if you did that on purpose. If it were me, he would have been skewered by Lavias. What would you do if he injured you?”

Mira responded with a cold tone. She frowned while thinking of Ellen's dangerous situation. Being pressed by the two, Ellen looked about awkwardly.

In fact, there were signs of jealousy in both Lim and Mira, though Regin was the only one to notice.

“... Sorry. It won't happen again.”

“I'll remember that. Really, you woke up in a single shot. It was too intense.”

Ellen hung her head with drooped shoulders. Tigre patted her on the shoulder to comfort her. In the meantime, the meals were prepared.

The fragrance of cooked cheese and wine emitted a particularly strong scent, stimulating the appetite. There was also a stew with meat and salted turnips.

There was also deer meat and rye bread wrapped and steamed in grape leaves. Grape leaf-wrapped venison is a time consuming dish usually prepared only for those with distinguished military services. There was also an apple pie with molasses for desert.

“This is quite grand.”

Ellen mildly showed her surprise while Tigre remained calm.

“The nearby villages and towns sent them. They're trying to win our favor, I'm sure.”

Artishem was a large city, and there were hundreds of people who fled to the neighboring towns and villages. Artishem would no longer function as a city after Ganelon set fire to it, so, naturally, they made efforts to save themselves.

“You received this as it is?”

“Though we paid them, it is true we drove the price down.”

Tigre smiled bitterly as he recalled Gerard's negotiations. Along with Rurick, they managed to buy food, fuel, leather, and other supplies such as wood and straw.

Ellen changed the topic and began gnawing on the bread with a serious face.

“So, what will we do next? Will we take this opportunity to completely crush Thenardier?”

Lim, Mira, and Regin looked at Tigre. They had woken him forcibly to learn this.

“No---”

Tigre shook his head and placed his plate of soup down.

“When dawn comes, we will march to Artishem.”

“To help the residents? Do you think we have the necessary supplies?”

“Though I say we will advance, we will only be closing the distance. Artishem is... right, it should be about two days away.”

Tigre explained to Mira who looked at him in confusion.

“We will go to Artishem to find evidence that Regin is of the Royal Family.”

Tigre looked at the girls sincerely.

“My goal is the safety of Alsace and to find proof of Her Higness being a member of the Royal Family. It is not a necessity to fight Duke Thenardier.”

“True. His Dragons, his last resort, are gone. Duke Thenardier cannot move immediately, and if you can prove Regin is royalty, she can charge him with attempting to kill Her Highness.”

Lim quickly analyzed the situation.

“Your Highness, can you tell us once again about the area beneath Artishem?”

Regin nodded to Tigre's question.

“I was only taught the knowledge. I have not yet visited it myself. It was called [Charles' <sup>Sangroel</sup> Sacred Grounds of the Palace], and it was created before the Brune Kingdom was established. It is said King Charles had a revelation there; that is where he decided to become King.”

“Sacred Grounds of the Palace? Seems a fairly exaggerated name for a cave.”

“Charles left word that it was an old temple or palace. It was not just a cave, since there was some level of development.”

Ellen asked with folded arms, and Regin responded while thoroughly searching her memory.

"There are three passages that enter the Sacred Grounds of the Palace. One is in the center of Artishem. Another is in the small temple of Mosha, the Goddess of Mother Earth to the southeast of Artishem. The third is at a cemetery in the east end of the city."

"The temple of Mosha would be closest to our position."

Mira spoke as she studied the map. Regin confirmed her answer.

"I have been to the city before. We can walk to the southeast from the eastern gate where a small shrine should be. The townspeople visit it once a month to pray, but other than that, it should be empty."

Tigre looked at everyone once Regin finished her explanation.

"In addition to the people here, we should bring about ten."

"You've decided on who to bring?"

"Her Highness and I will go. I would like to bring Batran and Rurick as well and two people they trust. I will let Lord Massas decide the rest."

As a mediator to the soldiers, he would leave Lim, Massas, and Augre. Gerard was included as well, since he seemed unsuitable to the task. He decided not to take Mira due to her position.

Regarding Rurick, he was worried the old man who had long served him would complain. He was worried about this, but Batran simply laughed as usual.

"Young Lord. When this war ends, you will be going to Zhcted."

To this old man who had been with him since he was a child, he could not lie. Batran simply smiled after giving Tigre his confirmation.

"Until this war ends, I will follow you, wherever you might go."

There was a shadow in his smile. It was a melancholy held only by those who had lived a long time.

"I am already this old. I will not make it out of Brune. Even if I wanted to follow you... my body would not last."

It was a lonely smile. Batran was 50 this year. He had served as a companion to his father, Urz. He was at an age where he could retire and live a normal life.

Already he could not follow the actions of those from Zhcted.

--- *Until the war ends, is it?*

That is why he chose Batran.

However, he had not made this choice purely with his emotions. For his age, Batran had excellent strength and skill with the spear. Though self-taught, he was good enough to teach Urz, as well. It was not for show that he was a servant for such a long time.

Besides, Tigre felt reassured with Batran by his side. He had looked after Tigre as a child, after all.

As he recalled his conversation with Batran, Ellen suddenly spoke up.

“Then I will go as well.”

It was not only Tigre that was surprised, but Lim and Mira as well. While the two looked at her strangely, Ellen smiled.

“This discovery is also related to my future. Isn't it fine for me to accompany you?”

“Please think of your position, Eleanora-sama. You are a Vanadis. There may be heinous traps or fierce beasts lurking within.”

“That's right. If I can't handle that much, I wouldn't be suitable as a Vanadis.”

The two people let out a violent aura which affected Regin more than Ellen. It was undeniable that traps would be set in the [Sacred Caverns of the Palace].<sup>Sangroel</sup> Her words were painful for someone of Mira's standing to hear.

Ellen simply caught their gaze with her bright red eyes.

“Lim. Can you prepare five people in our army who could overpower me? If you can, then I will leave it as it is. Ludmira, this will be decisive. Am I suitable to being a Vanadis? Let this give you an answer.”

Lim and Mira could not object for a moment. She was a 16 year old and the strongest fighter in LeitMeritz. She had the Silver Flash, Arifal, above all else. The only one who could possibly fight evenly with Ellen in the army would be Mira.

After silencing the two, Ellen turned to Tigre.

“With that said, you are the General of the army. I leave the decision to you.”

Tigre was at a loss for words being suddenly pressed for a decision. It was true the final decision was Tigre's, but it was still a problem.

All the girls except Ellen watched with bated breath. She was the <sup>Silvfrau</sup> [Wind Princess of the Silver Flash]. They quietly waited for Tigre's answer.

It was reassuring to have Ellen with him, but, as Lim had said, she was someone from LeitMeritz. He should not expose her to needless danger.

“... Should something happen.”

Tigre put his thoughts together and forced himself to speak.

“You prioritize yourself and Her Highness, Regin, no matter what danger befalls us. If you do so, I will take you.”

“Yeah, got it.”

Ellen answered promptly.

# Chapter 4 - Sacred Caverns of the Palace

When Tigre and the rest visited the Temple of Mosha, the sky was still the blue of early morning. Tigre, Ellen, Regin, Rurick, Batran, and five soldiers from Brune whom Massas chose were present. In addition, there were two soldiers from Zhcted Lim chose; twelve people were present in total.

The vineyards spread as far as the eye could see. At the end of winter, it was a lonely scene. It would take several months before the land was covered in greenery.

“It certainly is a small shrine.”

Ellen muttered as she looked at the temple from her horse.

The temple was made of gray stones with Mosha's name carved above the door.

The building was small, and Tigre felt it appropriate that Regin had called it a hut. The walls were decorated with ornaments and pillars that were several hundred years old, and fine cracks could be seen here and there.

The horses were tethered at the entrance and the twelve people passed into the temple. It was not very wide, but it was still surprising how clean it was.

There was an altar in the back. On top of a plinth was the image of a beautiful woman; it was a statue of the Goddess Mosha. A crown of mistletoe was planted on its head as a decoration – a dedication from the people from the nearby towns and villages who visited the shrine.

“We should pray as we move on. Let's have a good harvest this spring.”

Ellen laughed lightly as she looked at the crown of mistletoe. The Gods worshipped by Brune and Zhcted were mostly the same.

“You should pray to the <sup>Triglav</sup> God of War that we don't lose.”

"Right. Let's not have any trouble, then."

Ellen and Tigre bantered with each other while Regin stood behind the statue of the Goddess.

"I need two or three people. Can you help support this statue of the Goddess Mosha?"

Hearing her words, Tigre, Ellen, and Batran walked over to Regin, followed by the Brune soldiers. They grasped the waist of the statue while Rurick and the Zhcted soldiers warned the people of the temple. Regin walked as they worked.

Regin pulled a dagger from her waist and stabbed it into a slot just beneath the plinth and twisted it. A part of the floor moved away, revealing a small cavity. She placed her hand into the cavity without hesitation. A moment later, a hard sound was heard.

Regin stood up and let out a small breath of relief. She placed her hand on the statue of the Goddess.

"Next we need to push this statue over."

The soldiers supporting it carefully tilted it. Tigre and Batran helped so as not to destroy the statue. Soon enough, the statue was removed with the pedestal.

"... Stairs?"

There was a large hole beneath the base of the statue. A stone stairwell extended deep beneath the ground. Everyone stood tense as they let out a deep breath.

Hearing Regin's calm voice, the soldiers managed to calm themselves. With a torch, three Brune soldiers descended first. After a short time, they reported that there were no dangers for the time being.

"We'll go as well. Regin should remain between Tigre and me."

Without waiting for an answer, Ellen jumped into the stairwell. The stairs were tight, and Regin's body was tense with anxiety. Tigre patted her shoulder to ease her mind.

"Your Highness. It is as Ellen said. She and I are here."

When he said this, Regin's tight expression relaxed. They walked down the stairs with torch in hand.

Tigre looked back at the two Brune soldiers following him and checked the condition of his bow.

"You should remain as a lookout. Use the horses and turn away anyone who comes by. If the enemy comes, run away."

Tigre placed his foot into the darkness. Batran, Rurick, and the soldiers from Zhcted followed shortly afterward.

At the base of the stairs was a straight passageway.

"It's cold."

Rurick frowned and placed his hand to his bald head. The air was cold and dry, as if it had dozens of years to precipitate. Regin faintly trembled.

"... It's firmly built."

Ellen looked at the surroundings in admiration. The earth was firm and flat, and the walls were lined with gray stones without a single space. The ceiling was not high, but they were supported solidly with thick wooden beams at regular intervals to prevent it from collapsing.

The passage was wide enough to allow two adults to stand side by side. Regin walked beside Ellen, and Batran walked beside Tigre. The Zhcted soldiers were in the back, and the three Brune soldiers led the way with torches in hand.

For a while, only the sound of the burning torches and echoing footsteps could be heard.

"I wonder why this passage was built. With its support and size, it feels like a passage for escape."

"Perhaps it was a road. A powerful clan governing the region lived in Artishem before the Brune Kingdom was established."

Regin responded with a wry smile. Ellen remained confused.

"You understand? I suppose knowing the use of the <sup>Sangroel</sup>"

[Sacred Caverns of the Palace] really does prove you're royalty."

"Until Charles founded our country, the [Sacred Caverns of the Palace] were simply underground passageways. It seems Charles made use of them."

Regin did not feign ignorance. This passage might have been built with the purpose of escape, but, as Ellen had said, it could be used to invade the city.

"I doubt the passage will collapse with just a little noise."

She spoke brightly to reassure everyone. Ellen began to tease her.

"But there might be traps to stop any pursuers."

"It should be fine. It required routine maintenance, so those things would just get in the way. Of course, we should still remain cautious."

Regin responded decisively. Ellen looked at her with admiration. She was a girl brought up with the dignity of royalty, but it seemed she had some strength independent of that.

Though it was not possible to judge from her reaction alone, they were working to obtain proof of her royalty now, so it was an attitude she welcomed.

The passage was not a straight road, as it split off to the right and left. There were also stairways which led deeper underground. The road tapered off so that it was difficult to walk side by side, and eventually it became difficult to walk through without supporting one another.

Furthermore, there were holes in the ceiling in which arrows, spears, or stones could come flying from.

However, like Regin had said, nothing triggered them. They continued down the passage until, eventually, they found a place to rest.

Ellen was the first to notice.

"There's something carved on the wall."

Hearing those words, all members came to a halt. The Brune soldiers who were ahead did not notice because they were focused on scouting ahead in the darkness.

"... An ancient mural."

Regin looked at the wall next to Ellen. Tigre turned his gaze there as well.

Though he could not easily understand it from a glance, he used his imagination. There was a monster with three heads standing opposite a human.

"If you don't mind... please tell us about this painting."

Ellen asked as she glanced at Regin from the side. Certainly, Tigre was interested in the mural as well. In all actuality, Rurick, Batran, and all the soldiers were also interested.

"... This depicts the battle between the Gods and the Dragon."

After some hesitation, Regin spoke carefully.

"It is an ancient story about the confrontation between the Gods and the Dragon. Though I do not understand the reason, the Dragons attacked the Pantheon of Gods. The earth, the heavens, the netherworld... In all the worlds, only the Dragon existed. It was an existence which could harm the Gods, so they were feared."

"It's a story which brings up complicated feelings as someone from Zhcted."

Ellen looked at the mural with a bewildered face. It was not just her but Rurick and the Zhcted soldiers who wore complex expressions. Tigre simply looked at the mural in admiration.

*--- So this monster is a three headed Dragon.*

"The Dragon's strength was frightening. Rather than continuing to fight, which might have led to the Gods being overthrown, three Goddesses decided to try and control the Dragon."

Regin advanced a few steps as she continued to explain. On the wall was a picture of three goddesses with their hands on the scruff of each neck of the Dragon. Tigre visualized the Gods worshipped in Brune within his mind.

*--- Amongst the Pantheon of Gods, there are four Goddesses. Elis, the Goddess of Storms, Mosha, the Goddess of Mother Earth, and Iarilo, the Goddess of harvest, and then... The Goddess of Night, Darkness, and Death, Tir na Fa.*

The Goddesses were likely Elis, Mosha, and perhaps Iarilo. Tir na Fa was often depicted as something dangerous or dirty amongst the Pantheon of Gods.

With that in mind, he noticed one of the three Goddesses which calmed the Dragon down had a bow on her back and a quiver at her waist.

*--- Elis has a horn, Mosha is decorated with flowers, and Iarilo is wearing thin fabric.*

He could roughly determine the deities based on their garb.

Tigre did not know of any Goddesses with a bow.

*--- I wonder if anyone knows.*

Perhaps, in Brune Kingdom, where the bow is not recognized, all statues with bows that existed until now might have been destroyed. Tigre had no way of knowing.

“It is said the Founder, Charles, had his revelation to become King here in Artishem. It is said he received Durandal and the blessings of Bayard from the Pantheon of Gods in the Ruberon Mountains.”

“Yes. If it's that sword, he could definitely fight against a Dragon.”

While Regin's voice was tense, Ellen commented as if it was not her concern. Though surprised Regin had explained this far, the Vanadis with silver-white hair simply expressed her gratitude.

Of course, those from Zhcted would also run away if they were attacked by a wild Dragon; however, they have an affinity with them. It was not pleasant for them to hear stories of fighting Dragons. Many of them may have even felt angry.

That is why Ellen spoke with an attitude telling Regin to not worry. It was to clear away the awkward atmosphere.

“This mural...”

Regin gazed into the heart of darkness, deeper into the <sup>Sangroel</sup> [Sacred Caverns of the Palace].

They walked into an open area which was dimly lit.

High above was a dim light shining upon the room.

The area could have contained the entirety of the shrine worshipping the

Goddess Mosha. On one side was a large door, as if it were created for a giant to walk through. It was made of metal and had a height and width of about five alsin (about five meters). There were also two cavities opposite the passage they had just walked through.

However, Tigre became tense by something more astonishing.

“... So you came.”

Close to twenty men stood before the door, all armed with swords and clad in armor. At the center was a man in his 40s. He had a dignified and intimidating presence.

“Duke Thenardier...”

Regin let out a shocked voice. Ellen frowned upon seeing Thenardier. It was her first time meeting him.

“The real thing? He seems fairly lightly guarded for the General.”

Ellen placed her hand on the sword at her waist as she cracked a joke. Those with torches moved to protect Regin and Tigre. Batran readied his spear next to Tigre, and Rurick moved toward Ellen.

“You will understand if I am the genuine article simply by killing me.”

Thenardier spoke arrogantly in response to Ellen's words. Afterward, the black-haired Duke faced Regin.

“I see. So you really were alive.”

“... How were you able to come here?”

Violent emotions rampaged within Regin. She clenched her teeth in anger, seeing the man who tried to kill her. It was difficult for her to remain calm, yet the Duke simply responded curtly.

“It would be meaningless to tell someone who will die.”

Thenardier pulled out the sword at his waist. As if it were a signal, the soldiers, excluding one man, began to move. The man had short golden hair and blue eyes. His sword was in his hand as he stood guarding Thenardier.

There were several reasons Duke Thenardier appeared here.

To begin with, he had been Duke Ganelon's enemy for several years. He had considered how to attack Artishem, and he had scouts enter it repeatedly so he could form a plan. He did not know of the [Sacred Caverns of the Palace] beforehand.

However, Thenardier thought of it as a means of escape in an emergency. For a man who was not a member of the Royal Family, this place had no other value.

When he heard rumors of Regin being alive, Thenardier recalled the existence of this passageway. He thought Tigre would place priority to visiting this location over fighting him.

Thenardier made this judgment when he received a report that the [Silver Meteor Army] began moving toward Artishem. He himself came personally after having been disgraced with the failure of killing Regin once already.

Though he wanted to leave Steid, his aid, to manage the army, the faithful man requested he accompany Thenardier with an unusually stubborn attitude.

*I cannot afford to let Your Excellency go alone. If you still insist, then cut me down right here.* His aide with fair hair went so far as to say that.

Due to Steid's expression, Thenardier was accompanied by Steid and twenty soldiers from his army.

Rather than saying he had predicted this, he was simply lucky.

--- The distance is short...!

Tigre quickly stepped back to create a space and pulled out his bow. He nocked an arrow, pulled his bowstring, and quickly fired toward Thenardier.

The next moment, the sound of an arrow being broken was heard. Steid had protected Thenardier.

“Tigre, Regin, Fall back!”

Ellen shouted. Tigre pulled back while guarding Regin. They were outnumbered by Thenardier's subordinates two to one. After regaining his

balance, they retreated through the passage. Even if slight, it would reduce the advantage held by the enemies.

A dull sound echoed as the passage was bathed in blood. A Thenardier soldier who had charged straight forward was quickly cut away by Ellen's sword. When the soldier fell to the floor, the remaining soldiers of the Unstoppable Silver Flow [Silver Meteor Army] and the soldiers of the Thenardier Army clashed intensely.

Though they were skilled soldiers chosen by Massas and Lim, the Thenardier soldiers were similar. Blood was scattered about the floor.

Ellen's longsword gave off a sound as two more enemies were felled. Three soldiers closed in on her. She parried and dodged their incoming attacks as she and the other men pulled back. She wiped her sweat away and regulated her breathing.

*--- There may be more enemies, but they aren't as good as us. We should be able to escape.*

Even for Ellen, if she showed a chance, she would not be able to escape unscathed. Even with fewer enemies, the three were focused on running down the passage to escape.

“--- Steid. Go.”

After looking at Thenardier and hesitating for a moment, Steid followed after them.

“... Rurick, can I leave this to you?”

“If it is your command, Vanadis-sama.”

She smiled fearlessly as she asked the bald headed Knight, her eyes still on the enemy.

Gradually, the Thenardier soldiers closed the distance while being careful not to fall into disarray. If they came rushing in, they would lose, even if the enemy was inferior in number.

Rurick answered as a Knight of Zhcted.

“I leave it to you.”

Ellen's response was short. Having said that, she kicked off the floor and flew into the air to the ceiling beyond the reach of the enemy, quickly passing them by.

The Thenardier soldiers were stunned having seen something they had never seen before.

Rurick and the Zhcted soldiers let out a cry and jumped forward. Their swords shined brilliantly in the darkness and cut through the enemy's throats. The smell of blood mixed with the air.

Rurick quickly stepped back as the Thenardier soldiers began fighting back. Tigre shot an arrow as cover, the arrowhead burrowing itself in the head of a soldier.

A faint noise was born amongst the Thenardier soldiers. The arrow seemed to have flown out of nowhere from the darkness.

Because of the bulk of the soldiers from the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army], Tigre and Regin, who were behind them, were completely hidden.

Taking advantage of the enemy's anxiety, Rurick quickly moved in and attacked.

At that time, Steid jumped out before the soldiers and blocked the Knight's attack. A sharp metallic sound rang through the corridor. Due to Steid's strength, Rurick was forced to step back.

Steid did not stop and moved forward to finish Rurick off, only to be stopped as Tigre shot another arrow.

Though surprised, the swordsman did not show a change in his expression. He casually placed his left hand before his face. The arrow moved away, as if attracted to the dark gray gauntlet.

Though Steid was distracted for only a moment, Rurick was able to recover his posture. He knew he had no room to relax with the enemy before him.

“... A wonderful skill.”

Steid muttered those words as he cut the distance once again.

“With large allies blocking your path in a dark and narrow passageway at such

a short distance from your enemy, you can shoot both quickly and accurately. It seems your <sup>Silvrash</sup> [Star Shooter] name is not for show."

Tigre was shocked that his arrow which was shot at such a close proximity was caught. He had grabbed an arrow an enemy shot himself in Alsace, but the speed of his own arrow was far different, and the enemy was not directly before him.

Even if Steid praised Tigre, he spoke indifferently to Rurick.

"Leave, soldier. Earl Vorn and Princess Regin. Only two lives are necessary here."

Toward the demand from someone clearly superior in strength, Rurick snorted.

"What kind of Knight would I be if I stood back just because I was told to."

Ellen, who had landed behind the Thenardier soldiers, ran straight toward Duke Thenardier. Though she thought there would be a number of soldiers on the way, there were not.

*--- Like I thought, he's a fake. If not...*

Even when Ellen ran straight for him, Duke Thenardier did not flinch at all, nor did his arrogance falter. He did not even bother to unsheathe the sword at his waist.

A flash of white light, different from that on the battlefield, lit the room, and the sound of metal followed afterward. Arifal's sharp blade was swung intensely, but it was blocked.

Ellen looked wide-eyed in amazement and increased her will to fight. She attacked with her longsword in all directions, but, though he showed no signs of blocking the attacks, the Silver Flash never once touched Thenardier's body.

Ellen retreated a half step and prepared her breathing. Thenardier went on the offensive, as if waiting for that moment. He drew his sword in a forcible, yet well trained manner. Though his speed was inferior, it was supplemented by his peerless sword technique.

Thenardier's sword technique had a completely different quality compared to Ellen's. He had gripped the sword since he was seven and had clear motions, down to his fingertips, due to his constant effort. It was a skill Ellen could not possibly have obtained at this point in her life.

*--- If he's no fake, then he must have been absolutely confident in his skill.*

Sparks flew as they exchanged blows, the atmosphere bent with every impact. A whirlwind the color of iron assaulted Ellen. She switched to defense to receive every one of Thenardier's attacks. He was a formidable opponent who far exceeded her expectations.

*--- I wouldn't say I can't beat him... but he's a difficult one.*

She would be injured if she relaxed for even a moment.

"Even though you have yet to reach 20... you are a prime example of what a woman should be."

With sweat on his brow, Thenardier gave words of admiration. Ellen responded with a short grunt and sarcasm.

"I should say the same to you. To think you'd come down to this dark cavern yourself at your age."

"I missed a kill once before. Naturally, I should confirm it with my eyes this time."

He was clearly referring to Regin.

Again, their swords clashed, followed by a strange sound in the distance. Though the two battle-tested warriors would be unfazed by this, Thenardier and Ellen separated and saw something different from an enemy.

Tigre and the others, in a different place from the two, were in a similar situation. Two soldiers of the ~~Unstoppable Silver Flow~~ [Silver Meteor Army] were cut down by Steid, and Rurick had numerous wounds. Sensitive to the signs of something approaching, Steid began to retreat with the surviving subordinates.

Rurick did not chase after Steid, since the expressionless opponent did not provide an opportunity. The bald headed Knight of Zhcted and Tigre both felt something unpleasant with their skin, and neither felt it was a good

premonition.

Small clumps of earth and sand fell from the ceiling, breaking apart on the ground and hitting everyone present.

--- *An earthquake? No...*

A thunderous sound echoed, and a large crack ran through the ceiling. It was not earth and sand but many small stones which fell from the ceiling. Ellen left Thenardier and quickly ran to Tigre and the others.

Thenardier did not chase after her. The ground had shaken terribly, and the cracks extended from the walls to the ceilings. He prioritized his safety before the enemy and made to escape as quickly as possible.

“Retreat!”

Thenardier shouted to his subordinates and ran down the passage he had come from.

“All of you, run away with His Excellency.”

As the tremor increased in intensity, Steid quietly ordered his subordinates in their confusion. Other than Thenardier, he was the only one to maintain his calm.

The Thenardier soldiers managed to run along as the ground bounced about intensely. Ellen ran by them, with no room to worry about them.

Tigre and the soldiers had placed their hands on the wall and were desperately trying to escape. Being underground and with stones the size of their head falling, they were becoming increasingly anxious.

“Rurick! Take care of Her Highness!”

Tigre sent Rurick ahead and remained at the tail end. Though it was dangerous, he did not wish to leave Ellen behind. Batran also lowered his waist and refused to abandon Tigre.

Ellen returned. They exchanged glances and continued to run. Tigre let the two lead the way and followed after them.

Feeling danger behind him, Tigre jumped sideways immediately. A argent arc

passed by him immediately afterward. Steid had approached him before he was aware, and attacked. If it were not for the intense shaking and falling rocks, Tigre might have been cut.

“Earl Vorn. I will have you die here.”

He spoke with a cold tone that sent chills up his spine. The expressionless man wanted his life from the bottom of his heart. He had no attachment to his own.

Steid's second attack came at once. Because of the falling rocks and the intense tremors, Tigre had no choice but to throw himself on the floor, but that was all he could do. While Tigre began to rise, Steid, Thenardier's most trusted aide, raised his right hand, and swung downward.

The dazzling sword dropped overhead, but before it hit Tigre, a small shadow appeared between them.

*Batran*, Tigre's shout was swallowed by his sudden collapse.

Though Ellen was aware of Steid's attack, she could not run immediately due to the intense shaking.

While grasping Arifal, she rushed to his aide, only to be stopped by a large rock falling before her.

If she had not jumped away, Ellen would have been crushed in an instant. It would have required several adult males to pull it out of the <sup>Sangroel</sup> [Sacred Caverns of the Palace].

“This...!”

Ellen brandished Arifal, but someone grabbed her from behind. It was a Zhcted soldier.

“What are you doing!”

“Vanadis-sama! Please, stop here!”

The soldier perceived Ellen trying to use her <sup>Veda</sup> Dragonic Skill. Though the passage was collapsing, he returned to desperately beg her. Though Tigre's existence was important, it was the silver-white haired Vanadis that mattered

most to the soldiers of Zhcted.

Her subordinate's shout was like cold water showering over Ellen's burning emotions. She stopped and looked back at the wall behind her as stones fell from the ceiling.

"Tigre!"

Ellen shouted desperately, but her voice was crushed by the sound of earth and sand pouring down.

When Tigre regained consciousness, the earthquake had already subsided. His vision was hazy, even ignoring the lack of light. His eyes needed more time to adjust.

The pain in his body was dull. Tigre tried to recall what happened before he lost consciousness.

*--- That's right, Steid...*

"... Batran?"

Steid's sword swung downward, and Batran flew between them to save him from the killer's blade.

*--- No, It can't be...*

Perhaps it was a dream or a hallucination he had as he fainted. Though Tigre desperately tried to convince himself, his heart pulsed violently to deny them. His body erupted in a sweat.

*--- Please. Be safe, Batran...!*

He was impatient and could only pray.

*--- How is my body?*

He had lost his consciousness during the cave-in. He focused on putting strength into his limbs. First he moved his fingers, then worked his way up. Fortunately, he felt his bow in his left hand.

His eyes were acclimating to the light, little by little. Tigre slowly crawled along the ground, feeling his way with his right hand. He could feel a cold, rugged surface of stones above his head.

*--- The ceiling is too low... But it might be big enough to get my body through here.*

Apparently the bedrock had fallen and formed a small cavern. His eyes were finally able to see before him.

It was not as though he was in complete darkness. There was a dim light along the ceiling. He ran his finger along the ceiling to touch the luminescent powder. He was thankful for the light, even if it was very minimal.

Tigre was plotting his future course of actions when he quickly moved back in surprise. Tigre saw the face of a man turned upside down.

It was Steid. He remained silent for a moment while he recovered from his surprise. Tigre looked at Thenardier's aide, the Knight with a pale face. Even in death, he remained expressionless. His torso had been crushed by the rocks.

The man who had cornered himself died an unsatisfying death.

After thinking a while, Tigre gently closed Steid's open eyes. Though he understood he was being sentimental, he felt he should still do it out of courtesy.

*--- What's become of everyone? It seems like the ceiling collapsed in this area.*

Though he was not in a situation to worry about others, he was still uneasy. Still, he thought he would be safe for the time being, since there were no signs of the ceiling collapsing further.

*--- Anyway, I need to find some way to escape.*

He carefully moved his body about. He would likely die if he moved about unskillfully, since the passage could collapse. He could not stay here forever, so the first step to take was to check the size of the passageway.

However, an anxiety stronger than before attacked Tigre. Even his breathing had stopped.

“... Batran?”

His voice trembled. His eyes caught something beneath the dim light. It was the shadow of the small old man who had served by his side.

“Batran!”

He forgot the situation and shouted, crawling on his hands and knees as he climbed along the wall. He did not notice as rocks fell and hit the back of his head. Perhaps hearing his voice, the old man's body moved.

“... Young Lord.”

It was hoarse. Batran's voice, which was more like a groan, spilled from his mouth. Though Tigre was happy to hear an answer, that feeling disappeared in a moment.

Batran was cut deeply, from his shoulder to his waist. What Tigre saw was not a dream, it was reality. What he thought was a shadow was a pool of the old man's blood, spilling out from beneath him.

“So you're safe... Young Lord.”

“Yeah, I'm safe. You saved me, so I'm not injured at all.”

He grabbed the hand Batran struggled to lift. Tigre replied while frantically nodding. He had hoped to reassure him, but the old man's hand had already become cold.

“... Your hand, it's warm. You're safe... It seems this old body still... had its worth.”

Batran's voice was weak, and his speech was choppy. His life was at an end, yet he was relieved to know Tigre was safe.

Tigre grasped his hand and urged him as strongly as he could, as if to call out to the soul anchoring the old man's life to his body.

“No more, Batran! You can't die here. Didn't you want to return to Alsace? Don't worry about me!”

“I... do.”

Batran looked up at Tigre's face. His eyes were hollow; it was unclear whether or not he could see Tigre at all.

“That's right... Spring is... just around the corner. I'm sure... it will be so green.”

"That's right. Spring is coming soon. That's why—"

"... Urz-sama."

Startled by Batran's words, Tigre could no longer speak.

His left hand shook. Tigre strongly grasped his hand. Batran smiled and spoke painfully.

"My son... My son is splendidly doing his best to protect it. In order to protect the Alsace Urz-sama left behind, for the sake of peace... even Zhcted has become your ally. I'm sure they're planning something, or they wouldn't cooperate, but still, my son, I'm happy... I'm proud."

Tigre remained silent and stared at Batran's face. When Urz was still alive, Batran had called Tigre in that manner.

Perhaps he was delirious in the last moments of his life. The old man was not by Tigre's side. His eyes were hollow, seeing Tigre's father in his place. He spoke, though he was no longer in this world.

"When Urz-sama died, I was unable to do anything... I was anxious, uneasy. Our son was only 14, and he would govern Alsace. Massas-sama had a duty to his territory. I could not let him take care of everything... But my worries were unfounded."

Tigre remained silent and listened to Batran's words.

He could not possibly tell him not to speak. The old man had served by his father's side long before Tigre was born, but he would live no longer. Even if he did not want it, the thick odor of blood and the cold from the hand he grasped forced reality upon him.

Batran had little life remaining, and Tigre did not want to interrupt him. He could not possibly do it.

"My son... No, Young Lord. I felt wonderful when you relied on me. I was happy to play the role of a parent in place of Urz-sama, if even a little... I was so eager, but... It was embarrassing."

Batran tried to laugh, but he began choking as blood spilled from the sides of his mouth. Tigre placed his bow on the ground and gently wiped it off Batran

with his sleeves.

“Urz-sama's worries and my own... were unnecessary. The Young Lord turned his eyes only to Alsace. But, though you love Alsace, you must look outside...”

He had a fit of coughing once again. Blood spilled out of his mouth as he continued to speak. However, his voice was weaker and more rapid than before.

“That's why... Don't worry...”

His voice had become quieter, and the space between words had increased. Tigre desperately endured his desire to shout out as he clenched his teeth. He drew his ear to Batran's mouth.

“I'm happy. Urz-sama, Young Lord. I have been blessed with good Lords...”

“--- Batran.”

His words broke away. He could not suppress his feelings of rage. Tigre called the man's name. Batran breathed in pain again. A light returned to his vacant eyes as he stared at Tigre. He smiled with joy.

Though the old man tried to utter something, no sound came out. Tigre thought he had called for Teita.

Finally, he quietly closed his eyes.

Clasping the faithful old man's hand, the youth cried without uttering a word.

--- As if reacting to the emotions of its Lord, the black bow trembled.

# Chapter 5 - Decisive Battle

Four of those who had entered the temple of the Goddess Mosha remained. They were Ellen, Regin, Rurick, and a soldier from Zhcted.

Though Ellen had the impulse to destroy the upper part of the passage with her <sup>Veda</sup> Dragonic Skill on multiple occasions, she persuaded herself to endure. Burying it even further was not going to help Tigre in any way.

There were two reasons that helped Ellen remain somewhat calm.

One was Regin's existence. She was far more troubled than Ellen.

She had not stopped crying as she ran, and she could not speak words to blame herself. She had fallen hard once, and, after that, the Princess of Brune was carried on the back of one of the soldiers. Seeing her in that way beside her, Ellen regained her composure, little by little.

The other reason was Rurick. While she ran through the passage, the bald Knight shouted at Ellen.

“Vanadis-sama. Lord Tigrevurmud will be safe! He is skilled with the bow, his skill is superior to death, and that is why he will survive! He won't die in a place like this!”

Rather than encouraging Ellen, he was persuading himself. Still, Rurick's words had saved Ellen. Rurick was a good archer, but not as excellent as Tigre. What he said held weight, or so she thought.

“We'll go to Artishem.”

After they returned to the temple, Ellen looked back at Regin whose breath was still not regulated, and she reported in a dignified voice.

“That cave-in was very localized. It did not seem to go any further than the passage we returned from. Though I don't know how, it only affected the <sup>Sangroel</sup>”

[Sacred Caverns of the Palace]."

"You mean to dig up the area around the cave-in... how will we do that?"

Rurick had an uneasy expression. Even the Zhcted soldiers were weakly objecting.

"However, Lord Tigrevurmud..."

Ellen glared at the two intensely, however, she shook her head immediately.

"... Though I don't think this is the case, it is still an emergency. We need to collect the corpse. There is the possibility they are also searching."

These words startled Regin, finally stopping her tears. Tigre's death would lead to the collapse of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army]. Even if the possibilities were slim, Thenardier might return with dozens of soldiers.

"--- Yes. If there are corpses, we cannot let them have it. No matter what."

*This is no time to cry. I am sorry. I cannot do this now. I must move my feet, move my hands.*

Regin found courage at last and nodded to Ellen with her blue eyes. Her eyes showed her belief in Tigre's safety, but she could not hide her anxiety.

"I understand. Then let's move."

Rurick pulled himself together and responded to Ellen with a clear tone. The Vanadis with silver-white hair gave a command to Rurick and the Zhcted soldiers in a loud voice.

"Return to the main unit immediately and explain the details only to Earl Rodant and Limlisha. Have them dispatch two thousand men to Artishem."

After that, she turned to the soldiers of Brune.

"All of you, we will head to Artishem immediately. We will explain the details as we ride."

Her voice was strong and demanded presence, even to soldiers of another country. Without worrying about the dirt covering her, Ellen took actions. They had originally come riding two people per horse. They had been reduced to six people now; it was an ironic form of luck.

After leaving the temple, they divided into two groups. Ellen and the others ran to Artishem across the meadow.

The sky was blue and the sun had risen high. It was already well into the day. Though Ellen and Regin were exhausted, neither desired a break.

It did not take even a quarter koku to reach Artishem from the temple of Mosha. The ramparts surrounding the city had become visible immediately.

“What will you do when you go into Artishem?”

Regin pulled her horse next to Ellen's.

“We'll head to the [Sacred Caverns of the Palace]. I'll think of something when I get there.”

It was a violent answer, but Regin understood. The two gazed ahead as the walls of Artishem gradually approached.

--- The two opened their mouths wide at the same time.

A black light streaked perpendicular to the ramparts on the other side of the wall from the center of the city. A Black Dragon crossed the thoughts of the two girls the moment they saw the light.

The black light blew through the clouds, like a pillar connecting Heaven and Earth. The clouds above vanished. It was as if the Black Dragon had flown to the heavens.

A moment later, the air shook, reminiscent of a distant thunderstorm.

The black light grew thin and disappeared soundlessly.

“What was that...?”

They were far too surprised and could only think of those words. In contrast to Regin who could not hide her unease and tension, Ellen's mouth smiled hopefully. The image of the black bow the boy with red hair held floated to her mind.

“I don't know! But we're going!”

Kicking the horse's belly, Ellen quickly ran to the eastern gate.

Looking up at the rampart, a part of the walls surrounding Artishem had burned and collapsed.

Despite the tragic sight spreading before their eyes as they passed through the gate, Ellen and the others did not stop moving.

Soot and debris clung to the sides of the streets and the buildings. Everything was buried in rubble. Columns that still remained were colored black. Whoever saw it would only feel their heart go cold.

There were people who walked up and down the streets who looked terribly dirty, but compared to those sitting or lying down in the rubble, they looked much better. There were those searching for something to get them through the day, and there were those who walked unintentionally down the road with blank faces.



The entire city was shrouded in pain and despair.

Regin could think of nothing to say as she looked at the roads covered in rubble. The two soldiers of Brune who followed afterward trembled.

The Vanadis lightly tapped the frozen Princess.

“There is nothing we can do today. Let's go.”

Regin nodded helplessly. She had said it to herself before. She had no room to worry about others. There were few travelers in the city. The four stood out, but Ellen did not bother to stop.

“... The heart of the city is ahead of us.”

Regin spoke as she turned the corner. Before them was where the light had expanded.

The ground just a few steps before them was lost.

To be precise, there was a giant bowl-shaped crater.

The hole was the size of a small house, and it was focused at the point where the main streets intersected. All the pavement slabs had been destroyed; all that remained was soil and stone.

Many curious onlookers looked. They stared down at the hole, unable to hide their emotions.

Someone lay in the center of the crater.

“... Tigre!”

Seeing the boy with red hair and a black bow in his left hand lying in the crater, Ellen, without hesitation, rushed to the center.

Both his clothes and leather armor were in tatters, and his red hair was completely disordered. At first, she was confused seeing the black bow in his left hand, but she saw Tigre had carried someone on his back. Seeing this, Ellen understood.

“You're safe, Tigre!”

She ran up and held him in her arms. The face full of soot moved faintly and a voice called out.

"... Ellen?"

Though he looked weak, Ellen smiled in relief. However, Tigre's body suddenly lost strength at that moment. Ellen reached out to support him, her face full of anxiety until she saw that Tigre had fainted.

"Honestly... Making me worry like that."

Tears blotted the edge of Ellen's eyes, blurring her vision. However, having confirmed his safety, the Vanadis with silver-white hair forced them back.

After that, Ellen saw the elderly man's corpse on Tigre's shoulders. His clothes were stained with blood, and his face and body was more battered than Tigre's. He was dead. There was a large wound across his body which had taken his life away.

--- *So it's Batran.*

He was the elderly man who had served by Tigre's side. Ever since they entered the [Sacred Caverns of the Palace], he had remained by Tigre's side.

--- *Even in that violent tremor, you sacrificed yourself to save Tigre.*

Ellen closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she prayed to the Pantheon of the Gods for the peace and safety of his soul. He had far surpassed the border of life. It all began when he visited Tigre when he was still a prisoner of war.

Batran had done what she herself could not.

Suddenly, a rope was thrown to her feet. She looked up and saw Regin and the Brune soldiers grasping it tightly. They had secured it as she ran down the crater.

Ellen lay Tigre on the ground and took over the task of carrying Batran. She stood up after supporting Tigre once again and grabbed the rope. Regin and the others slowly pulled them up.

Looking at the surroundings, the people were gradually beginning to gather. Many had run away after seeing the light of the Black Dragon as it flew up to the sky. Because nothing else happened afterward, they came to see what had occurred.

Those who had been at the crater at the beginning and saw Ellen and the others arrive looked at the Vanadis and the Princess suspiciously.

However, no one called out to them. Perhaps they judged it would be bad to interfere, or perhaps they lacked the energy to act due to the fire.

In fact, the people remaining in the capital were simply too tired. They had lost their livelihoods to the fire, and the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] and Thenardier Army were approaching the city. They had no means of escape. At any rate, Ellen and the others could only appreciate the lack of interference.



The sun fell to the west, causing a subtle change to the blue sky.

The <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] was camped in a field thirty belsta away from Artishem.

In the General's tent, Ellen, Regin, Lim, Mira, Massas, Rurick, and Gerard sat in a circle.

After Ellen and Regin explained what happened in the <sup>Sangroel</sup> [Sacred Caverns of the Palace], there were a variety of reactions from those present.

“First of all... You are safe, Lord Eleanora. Your safety is a blessing.”

Said Massas as he bowed deeply, nearly to the ground.

Rurick and the others who left the passage headed to the base of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Fl</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] and immediately explained the circumstances to Massas. Massas quickly ordered the troops to prepare to withdraw and gathered one thousand men to head to Artishem at once.

“However, that was not our fate. The army would have collapsed immediately.”

Ellen sighed knowing his life was not in danger.

“Fate, is it...?”

Regin placed her hand to her mouth and was lost in thought after hearing Ellen's casual language.

“The moment we entered the [Sacred Caverns of the Palace]<sup>Sangroel</sup>, the area above us began to collapse... I wonder how likely that is.”

“Even if you ask, it just happened. Even if Thenardier was there, it was not something he did. To begin with, that is something impossible to do artificially.”

Ellen said those words with some darkness in her voice. At that moment, Teita entered with a number of cups on a tray.

Her face was dark and she had lost her voice. Massas knew the energy that was once in her smile and wanted to turn away in apology. She had endured her sorrows well.

The maid with chestnut-colored hair politely, but somewhat mechanically, placed porcelain cups before them one by one. Steam rose from the hot tea within.

“... Teita.”

After some slight hesitation, Ellen called out to her as a representative for everyone.

“Tigre... Um, how is he?”

“He is currently resting in another tent. He has a few bruises, and he seems weak, but he has no large injuries that could become a problem.”

Teita responded in a detached voice that was more indifferent than even Lim's usual tone.

“I understand. I know it is unnecessary to say this, but please stay with Tigre.”

*Thank you very much.* Teita bowed and left the tent after giving her gratitude in a small voice. They all looked down at the tea cups before turning to one another.

“Earl Rodant. You know Lord Tigrevurmud best, so I will ask you frankly. Will he recover by tonight?”

Gerard asked a question without any hint of reserve. Lim and Mira held their breath, and Rurick openly frowned, but none criticized him. It was an important question.

“--- I honestly don't know.”

Massas responded with a pensive expression, making the atmosphere even heavier.

“Tigre is the kind of person to bounce back quickly, but...”

In the battles until today, many soldiers from Alsace had been lost; however no one had a relation with Tigre as long or as deeply as Batran had. The small, brave man had served Tigre's father, Urz.

The sense of sorrow and loss was also clear in Teita's attitude.

“Tigre... only spoke about Batran?”

Regin nodded to Massas' question.

Tigre woke up just before they left Artishem. Even when Ellen asked about his injuries, he had remained silent. He only spoke when they mentioned burying Batran.

“Encase him in wax and place him in a coffin. In this season, he will last a month. Have Batran buried in Alsace.”

Immediately after saying those words in a strong tone, Tigre lost consciousness and remained asleep ever since.

“However, Lord Tigrevurmud clearly stated his intentions regarding Batran.”

“It may have come out of his desire to properly take care of Bartran. Since then, he has become like this.”

Regin's words were simply her clinging to hope. The Princess with hair of gold glanced at Ellen in hope, who simply clenched her fist atop her knee, enduring her helplessness.

“More than anything, all of you have returned safely. Regarding Duke Thenardier... have you seen any signs of him?”

To restore the atmosphere, Mira brought up the problem at hand. Massas

responded quickly.

"At present, there are no noticeable movements. From what I heard from Her Highness and Lord Eleanora, the Duke himself was in the <sup>Sangroel</sup> [Sacred Caverns of the Palace]. He will have returned to his army by now and is likely taking measures."

"... Do you mean to say he will accuse Lord Tigrevurmud of acting toward his own goals, and he is ordering an attack?"

Hearing those words, Lim had a tense expression. Her thoughts were quickly stopped.

It was not strange to think he would turn his anger toward Thenardier who interfered and caused Batran's death. The problem was that he would fight recklessly. If they were defeated here, there was a risk that the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] would collapse.

"Don't worry, Lim."

Ellen answered her adjutant with gold hair tied to the left side of her head.

"If that happens, I'll stop him, even if I have to knock him out."

"--- At any rate."

Massas looked about to conclude the meeting.

"No matter the reason, Thenardier's Army has begun to move, and we cannot neglect our own preparations. For now, we should leave Tigre – Lord Vorn alone for the night."

The conference ended with that. Ellen, Lim, Mira and Gerard left the tent. Only Rurick and Massas remained.

"... Is something wrong?"

Massas spoke with a questioning gaze. Even though the sun had fallen, the bald Knight did not have much of a chance to speak until now. Massas knew he looked up to Tigre and nothing more. Rurick finished the tea in his cup and stood up before speaking.

"Earl Rodant, will you not rest for a while?"

“Though I am grateful for your consideration...”

To Massas, he was only a member of a foreign army. The old Earl looked at Rurick curiously. Rurick simply responded with a shrug.

“I have been fighting for Lord Tigrevurmud, and I have spoken many times to Batran. We have played chess and various card games with one another.”

Batran, though Teita was also one reason, had become estranged from Ellen. However, Rurick, though a simple soldier, seemed to get along well with him. Massas continued evaluating the man before him.

“I have heard that you are also quite intimate with Batran, a friendship which surpasses rank. Even if it is only for a koku, you should also rest.”

Massas would be unable to bear it for more than one koku due to his sense of responsibility. Massas stroked his gray beard in silence while thinking about Rurick's proposal. Rather than asking a question, he simply gave his gratitude.

Rurick bowed to Massas as he stepped out of the tent. He stopped his legs immediately.

“Eavesdropping is a poor hobby.”

“No, no, I simply did not think you were so considerate.”

Gerard walked out from the shade of the tent with an unusual sign of admiration. Rurick did not show any signs of anger, though.

“Well, whatever. Help me. It's only one koku, so let's try and avoid having the Brune soldiers see anything.”

“Why should I help?”

“It would create problems if I ordered those from Brune directly.”

Rurick responded in a tone as if it were natural. Gerard looked at the bald Knight before letting out a large sigh.

“And here I thought you would beg me for help. I've been had... As expected from a man of Zhcted. You're neither easy nor naïve.”

“I will give orders and you can relay them. I will say this now, but I am only cooperating with you to help Lord Massas.”

"I suppose it can't be helped. It will only be more troublesome if I have to clean up your mess later... We'll need a barrel of Zhcted alcohol for this."

Gerard consented easily. He had planned to do nothing for Massas. It is only because his father, Augre, and Massas were close friends that he accepted.

While hurling insults at one another, the man from Zhcted and the man from Brune walked between the tents housing the soldiers.



In the center of his own tent, Tigre sat silently. He had been treated and was wearing fresh clothing.

He grasped his black bow tightly in his left hand and remained as still as a stone statue.

Teita quietly sat beside him. The tent was completely dark with not even a single candle lit. It was silent and the air was heavily stagnant.

It was a sight which directly represented Tigre's mindset.

[--- You did it.]

Unexpectedly, a voice shook the air. Though it was a voice, it did not emit through the ears; it was a voice which only Tigre could hear.

[You finally used the power of the bow without using my help or the help of others.]

He shot through the rocks in an instant.

Though the voice reached Tigre, he did not show a single reaction. Tigre simply stared into the nothingness before him. After a half koku, the [Voice] gave up and left.

[It must be serious if you aren't talking to me. I'll return when your mood is better.]

Tigre still did not show any particular change, as if he had never heard the

voice at all. Rage, regret, helplessness, loss, swirling emotions rampaged about his mind. It was as if his heart itself was dyed jet black.

Batran was killed by Steid, and Steid was Thenardier's subordinate.

However, he was already dead.

Revenge and remorse, two fierce animals struggled like violent dogs in his mind.

It had repeated constantly in his mind.

*If Thenardier wasn't there. No, if I didn't take Batran to the <sup>Sangroel</sup> [Sacred Caverns of the Palace]. No, if I had managed to get rid of Steid. No, if that tremor had not happened. No, no, no...*

*This is all meaningless, Batran is dead and he will not return, Whether I am angry or whether I have and regrets, I can't change that any longer.*

Tigre knew.

He knew it was not the time to stop, that he must move forward.

Though he understood, his mind ran idle. Except for his hand which grasped the bow, he had no energy. His lower body was heavy, as if it were trying bind him to the ground, keeping them from moving.

Batran could no longer feel happiness, anger, or sadness.

The sky was bathed in the ultramarine of twilight. Soldiers could be heard outside cooking, and smoke could be seen rising. Even so, Tigre showed no reaction.

As if mimicking him, Teita remained silent. She drew close to Tigre, thankful he was still there.

The soldiers finished their meals. Even when the stars and moon shined high in the sky, they did not move.

There was a change, and occasional questions were heard outside.

"I'll be bothering you."

With a natural tone and gait, one girl with a lit candle in her hand entered the tent. She was dressed in blue and had silver-white hair and bright red pupils. A

longsword was at her waist – it was Ellen.

Though Tigre looked up at her, he did not speak. Ellen placed the candlestick near the entrance and sat down.

“I will not hear anything vague. What do you want to do?”

“... Leave it for tomorrow.”

Tigre's response was tired. Teita glared at Ellen with a tearful face; she would cry soon. She grasped Tigre tightly and appealed strongly with her hazelnut eyes.

However, the Vanadis with silver-white hair did not flinch and continued quietly.

“You will decide now. If we wait until tomorrow, we will be pressed for time. That is why I will ask you now. What do you want to do?”

When Tigre remained silent, Ellen continued.

“You can't abandon the war now. Duke Thenardier has suffered a significant setback from the fight today, and he may negotiate depending on the conditions. You can defend Alsace.”

“... But what of your purpose, then?”

“I will manage it on my own. That's natural.”

He answered in a husky voice, and Ellen responded quickly. She was bluntly telling him she would take care of her own business; Tigre had no words to respond.

In the dead silence, Ellen looked at Tigre seriously and continued speaking.

“I have absolute pride that I can fight, that is what I have long since decided.”

“Pride...?”

It was a normal word, but it had surprisingly latched onto Tigre's mind. Tigre muttered the word again. Ellen simply nodded.

“That's right. Before I became a Vanadis... I was a mercenary, I had pride as a soldier.”

Ellen reached toward the longsword at her waist without separating her gaze from Tigre.

“To a mercenary, we have nothing to depend on, nothing to stand for. We only fight for money. We have no home to return to, only the battlefields we roam. Honor is an empty dream if you want to make a fortune in one go. Those who didn't understand would die. There was nothing – that is why I learned to have pride. Pride in myself, pride as a soldier.”

She spoke again with pride. Tigre muttered to himself again. He had heard it recently somewhere, and not from Ellen.

--- *That's right.*

It was when he was with Mira during his battle with Muozinel. At that time, she spoke of her pride that she had inherited from the generations before her, she had pride in her inheritance of the Frozen Wave that made her a Vanadis.

How did he respond?

“Stubbornness...”

He found the feelings he had lost sight of.

It was an important emotion. Without thought, he was dead.

Whatever he looked like, he would have been dead at heart.

“--- Teita.”

Hearing her name called unexpectedly, the maid with chestnut-brown hair that had remained still as a statue until then looked up to see Tigre's apologetic eyes.

He did not notice she had drawn close to him; he was pitying only himself, trapped in his sorrow. He could not possibly let Batran see him like that.

“Thank you... and sorry for worrying you.”

It was the calm voice of the Tigre she was familiar with. When she heard his voice and saw Tigre's gentle smile, she had lost all tension.

“Tigre-sama!”

Tears poured down Teita's eyes as she clung to Tigre. She buried her face in

his chest and continued to cry.

Tigre quietly embraced Teita and stroked her head and pat her back.

“We will return to Alsace once this war ends... When we finish the burial, tell me more about Batran. Tell me about the Batran you knew.”

While crying, Teita nodded many times.

Later in the night, when the moon, which lacked a clear shape, was high in the sky, Teita finally became exhausted from crying and fell asleep. After placing the woman who was deep in sleep on the carpet, he quietly placed a blanket over her and turned to Ellen.

“Thank you.”

He bowed deeply with those short words.

“What's that for?”

“For helping me. I haven't thanked you yet.”

Ellen looked at him curiously as Tigre gave his answer.

“If that's the case, then I should apologize for being too naïve. And it was not just me, Regin and Rurick were also there.

“Of course, I wish to express my gratitude to Her Highness and Rurick as well, and I will say so later. But... when I was unable to move, you were the one to give me support. I'm happy about that... and there's something else.”

Tigre turned back to the sleeping Teita and spun his words like a soliloquy while stroking her soft hair.

“Father... My father and Batran were worried for me, that I did not turn my eyes away from Alsace.

Tigre recalled Batran's words as he was approaching death. He had not noticed at all. More than anything, he was satisfied with Alsace.

“In his last moments, Batran was at ease. He no longer had to worry, since I can now see more than just Alsace”

“Doing so is your own accomplishment. I did nothing.”

Though forcible, she had given him a chance. She had taken him to LeitMeritz as a captive and let him roam about; she had given him freedom.

“... Well, since you went to the trouble of saying it, I'll accept your gratitude.”

Ellen smiled shyly as she continued.

“Now then, we should go meet with everyone. It's a bit troublesome now.”

Tigre quietly stood up so as not to awake Teita. Ellen also returned her sword back to her waist and lined up next to the young man.

“I'll go with you. It's better than being scolded alone, right?”

There would be no difference, either way. After exchanging a bitter smile, the two left the tent.

The two looked on with wide eyes at the same time. Lim and Mira stood there. Regin, Rurick, and Gerard, further into the tent, did as well.

“... How long have you been there?”

Ellen asked with an amazed face. Tigre had the same feeling, though he did not voice it.

“This man from Brune couldn't concentrate on his work.”

“This guy from Zhcted was so nervous, it was bothersome.”

Rurick and Gerard pointed to each other with sulky faces.

“There were matters which required your confirmation, Eleanora-sama; however, you were busy, so I waited for you to finish.”

Lim answered indifferently. Regin shrunk down with an apologetic face.

“Ah, um, it was an important talk, so I thought I should wait..”

“I wished to hear Tigre's opinion, so I thought it best to come here.”

Mira stood with her Frozen Wave and laughed mischievously. Tigre looked at everyone and played with his dull red hair before thanking every one of them.



The next day, Tigre and the others had gathered in the General's tent.

"There are two important reports."

The meeting began with the old Earl's words. Massas was unable to see what happened the night before, but he was relieved to see Tigre's face at the meeting and let out a sigh of relief.

Tigre, in the meanwhile, was worried about Regin's poor complexion.

"Though several people here know, a messenger from the Zhcted Kingdom came. To be more accurate, it came from Lebus Territory."

Hearing the name, Ellen frowned. It was the land governed by the Vanadis Elizavetta Fomina she had recently fought.

"We assume she wishes to make a connection of friendship with Tigre. She has sent five hundred barrels of pickled fish oil and three hundred barrels of alcohol. They are currently in the northern port of Crotoy. If you wish to receive it, we can have it brought here immediately."

Tigre cocked his head in bewilderment.

"Friendship...? I'm not particularly famous."

Tigre looked to Ellen, Mira, and Lim for help. Ellen frowned and looked resentful, while Mira simply shrugged at him.

"Indeed. Your activities should not have yet reached Lebas. She may have interest in you since Eleanora is cooperating with you. She is trying to have a connection with you in case you should win the battle."

After saying that, an ill-natured smile floated to Mira's mouth.

"However, her relationship with Eleanora is very bad."

Tigre looked at Ellen after hearing the Snow Princess' words. Ellen looked away from Tigre and responded with a snappy tone.

"I returned from Zhcted just the other day. She was the reason I had to leave. Also, she has connections to both Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon."

"Then it would be better to refuse."

“If it was sent to me, I would naturally turn it down, but---”

Ellen shook away her enmity before continuing to speak.

“But this is addressed to you. Well, she sent it over for free. I doubt it's poisoned.”

Ellen smiled dangerously as she spoke her dangerous assumption. Lim, perhaps out of her loyalty to Ellen, remained in silence without a change in her complexion.

Tigre reluctantly turned to Massas.

“What do you think, Lord Massas?”

“It would be a problem if we create bitter feelings by rejecting this. Given the amount they sent, it's well preserved. If they make some demand should we accept this, we may not be able to handle it. To be on the safe side, you may wish to send a reply.”

Tigre nodded and ordered Gerard to inspect the goods and ensure the proper quantity was received. He also told him to carry a generous amount to Artishem.

He was a man better with such things than the battlefield, so he would do his best.

“Now for the next report.”

Massas paused there and took a deep breath. Tigre was lightly surprised. From the attitude of the old Earl, the following conversation would be troublesome.

“A message from the Royal Palace, from Bodwin.”

Massas spoke with a serious expression. Tigre had heard the name somewhere. While exploring his memory, Massas smiled bitterly.

“He is the Prime Minister of our country. Pierre Bodwin.”

Tigre let out a sound involuntarily.

“Prime Minister, why...?”

“He said His Majesty has awoken.”

The Prime Minister of Brune Kingdom walked into the tent after Gerard. He was an elderly man with normal height and build, and he wore a gray uniform. His face was round and his eyes were small, and a gray beard and mustache extended from his face, making his overall appearance look like a cat.

Since it was their first meeting, Tigre bowed his head, but Bodwin softly shook his own.

“Long ago, I met you when you came with your father to the palace in the summer. It has indeed been a long time, Lord Tigrevurmud.”

He had the sense that he had just been smacked in the head. Tigre ruffled his dull red hair in confusion.

“... I heard His Majesty awoke from Earl Rodant. Please tell us, is there a specific reason you came here in person?”

Tigre thought there must be something other than business if this old man came out himself. Bodwin continued on.

“I wished to meet you. I wish to know your intent.”

Bodwin watched Tigre and spoke sonorously.

“You became a prisoner of Zhcted Kingdom in the battle at Dinant. Afterward, when Duke Thenardier's men invaded Alsace, you pushed them back with the soldiers of Zhcted Kingdom.”

Tigre nodded.

“Territoire led by Viscount Augre and Aude governed by Earl Rodant became your companions. Even with your title revoked and your territory taken away, your army did not dissolve; rather, you were able to repel the private army of Duke Ganelon and the Navarre Knights. Shall I continue?”

“He seems like a great criminal when you put it like that.”

Lim quietly rebuked Ellen as she made a joke from the side.

“Concerning my actions, that is correct.”

Tigre confirmed it with a serious expression. Bodwin shook his head and

narrowed his eyes quickly in a manner reminiscent of a cat.

“After this, what do you plan to do?”

“At present, I will fight Duke Thenardier. I will defeat him.”

Tigre spoke in a natural tone. The Prime Minister's cat-like face became increasingly grim.

“Then will you attack Duke Ganelon's territory as well?”

“No. Once I have secured Alsace's safety, I will return to Zhcted as a prisoner of war.”

Hearing Tigre's response, Bodwin half-opened his mouth and looked with round eyes.

“Of course. I'll make sure to treat you well.”

“I will welcome you as a guest if you wish to come with me.”

Ellen and Mira began quarreling behind Bodwin.

“... You will leave Brune?”

The old Prime Minister looked at him with a troubled face and voice. Tigre nodded quickly to wipe away his suspicions.

“Regarding my future, there are many things I must still discuss. However, for the time being, that is what I will do.”

“... What will you do with Durandal which Lord Roland entrusted you with?”

“I will return it.”

Hearing such a prompt answer, Bodwin's expression and profuse sweating showed he could not possibly understand. After that, he looked back at Massas. Massas had an unusually nasty smile.

“It is as you have heard, Bodwin. Tigre has no ambition. He is not the type to take advantage of this war.”

Tigre was satisfied as things were. Bodwin was afraid Tigre would use this war to become a major force.

The cat-faced Prime Minister turned to Tigre with a perplexed face.

“Then, you really are only defending Alsace...?”

“Correct, however, I wish to remind you, that to defend the peace of Alsace... I will have to relinquish my rights to Zhcted.”

Massas looked away. Ellen smiled as she always did, Mira smiled at him with both amazement and admiration, Regin looked at him popeyed, and Lim grimaced as if wavering between whether she should scold him or praise him.

Bodwin played with his mustache with his fingers. Though his mind was wavering between his emotions and his duties, the cat-faced Prime Minister showed no signs of it. Since there was no reaction, Tigre changed the subject.

“Regin, Your Highness.”

Tigre saw a shadow somewhere in Regin's expression, perhaps because she was unsure whether it was the time to talk. Bodwin glanced at Regin then returned his gaze to Tigre. He spoke in a prudent tone.

“Do you believe she is Her Highness, Regin?”

“I have no choice but to believe. She has spoken of something known only to His Highness and me. I have never once spoken of it, and I cannot think her appearance a coincidence.”

Tigre looked him in the eyes as he spoke the last part. According to Regin, King Faron, her mother, Thenardier, and Ganelon knew of her true gender. Bodwin spoke with an indifferent reaction.

“I cannot think of anyone else who might know. It is unlikely anyone else found out, however---”

Bodwin frowned like a cat that had just smelled something disagreeable.

“Even if I let it be known that she was the Prince, it would be useless. Who would possibly be convinced she was a member of the Royal Family? Only we would know, and we would have nothing to prove her identity, either.”

“Would it be pointless to return to the [Sacred Caverns of the Palace]<sup>Sangroel</sup> again?”

Ellen quickly gave an answer.

"About that, only the upper parts collapsed. We would need to remove all the rubble away."

"If possible... you could come to Nice. I would like you to meet His Majesty."

Bodwin gave his proposal as he looked at Regin.

"His Majesty... How is Father's condition?"

"It is not good."

Bodwin continued with an earnest expression.

"Though it was well hidden from you... His Highness suffered from an illness even before the battle of Dinant. Since then, his health has progressively deteriorated."

Regin's voice was lost. The King she knew was such an exuberant and healthy man overflowing with vitality compared to a normal 41 year old. Massas recalled what he heard across the door and scowled.

"His weakening body has reached even his mind... The doctors of the court have prescribed a variety of medicines, and the priests and shrine maidens have prayed for his health every day, but his condition has simply become terrible."

"I understand. Let's go to the Royal Capital."

Tigre was the one to answer. Everyone inside the tent glanced at him. Tigre continued with a sincere expression.

"If Her Highness can meet His Majesty, his condition may improve. I have no reason to refuse. However – we cannot avoid a battle with Duke Thenardier before that."

If King Faron regained his sanity and formally accepted Regin as a princess, Duke Thenardier would be accused of being a traitor for attempting to kill the King's child. No matter what he must do, he would act to prevent Regin and the <sup>Unstoppable</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] from reaching the Royal Capital.

Everyone present had no doubt the decisive battle would occur here.

Bodwin left the camp of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] before the day ended. The

cat-faced man quickly cut the distance and returned to the King's Capital one koku early.

"I am a civil servant. I would be of no help in the realm of battle. Even if it is only one koku early, I wish to report of Her Highness Regin's presence to His Majesty."

Tigre accepted his wishes and separated with the Prime Minister, allowing him fifty cavalrymen to defend him.



Felix Aaron Thenardier was nearly killed three times before the age of 10. By the time he turned 20, his attacks had increased four or five-fold. Since he inherited his title and territory at the age of 26, he was attacked even more frequently.

"Those who inherit the Thenardier name must be strong. They must be stronger than all others."

They were the words of his father which the Duke had heard every day from an early age. Contrary to his words, he was a sickly and clumsy man. Though his ability as a ruler was superior, he could not perfectly execute it.

"The weak are eaten by the strong. They will take your place; that is the way of the world. You must also not be content with weak blood. They, too, can be eaten."

Thenardier had three brothers born from the same mother. Including the children from different mothers, he had five more. He had no sisters by blood.

His father not only spoke his words but acted on them. The terror of Thenardier's father was that he allowed the children of his concubines to try and kill the children of his lawful wife.

Before he knew it, it had become similar to a story he had once heard from a traveling minstrel. Ten snakes were put in a jar, and they killed each other, one

by one within the container. Thenardier could not help but remember the story.

Thenardier trained himself. He studied the sword, the speed, horse riding skills, and politics from a young age. Against his half-brothers, born of his father's mistresses, Thenardier mercilessly beheaded those who lost and pleaded for their life.

When Thenardier turned 20, only his younger brother remained. The number of children had decreased to five or less.

At that time, Thenardier had one idea in his head.

"The weak are taken over by the strong. A strong man trains himself to remain strong, and a strong person will eat the weak."

He was cruel to the weak and incompetent, he was cruel to those who had no value to him. The only exception was his son Zaien. Perhaps it was his last bit of humanity, for better or for worse.

He promoted many people who showed a high capability, including his aide, Steid, who was of a superior standard. Save for him, the world was filled with the weak.

He was tyrannical in Nemetacum, the territory he governed.

This tyranny was the basis of his own existence. He examined the records over the previous fifty years and noticed how the land changed from ruler to ruler. For areas without especially talented individuals, he imposed a heavy tax.

"The weak are not useful and can do nothing but die. If they are gone, if someone capable survives, then the city will change quickly."

His words were not a lie. There were regions with very low taxes as well. Even so, it was not simply luck or fortune that followed them. The majority of people were treated violently.

He continued to rule with fear.

There were several reasons.

First, no one stopped Thenardier.

Though only King Faron had the ability to stop him, the Duke did not listen to

the King's words at all with the excuse of self-autonomy.

Thenardier could boast of the strength of Nemetacum that he governed, but more than that, he was on good terms with many powerful aristocrats.

Should these individuals all revolt when Thenardier ordered them to, All of Brune would be wrapped in the horrors of war. Because of this, though Faron was above Thenardier in rank, Thenardier spoke arrogantly before him.

Moreover, Thenardier showed no mercy to those who bore their fangs toward him.

For instance, three hundred bandits appeared in his territory, and he thoroughly crushed them with three thousand soldiers. Those who were caught stealing from the fields were crucified and left alongside the road. Thenardier himself would wield a spear and lead the troops on occasion. Because of his brutality, the security in his territory was the best in the country.

He also excelled in business and diplomacy. He had exchanges with some of the Vanadis of Zhcted, and the cities facing the sea to the south were well protected and had low taxes, bringing prosperity to his land.

There were also those weaker than Thenardier who rebelled against his tyranny, but they were quickly oppressed within a single night. Due to the examples set, very few happened in the future.

Nemetacum prospered due to fear.

Ten years passed, then fifteen. Thenardier had yet another thought.

There is nothing above the throne.

Just below the throne was the position of Prime Minister, but Thenardier looked further up.

The Duke despised the King. He was not a strong man. Though he may not have been weak, the King was at least below himself.

The weak exist to be eaten by the strong. He would take his position.

At that time, Duke Thenardier had two people he considered rivals. They were Duke Ganelon and Prime Minister Bodwin. He would accept the valor of the Black Knight Roland, but only several years later.

While studying Bodwin and Ganelon, he learned that the Prince was actually a Princess. To deal with this, he joined forces with Duke Ganelon; this happened one year before the battle of Dinant.

The <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] was camped in a field sixty belsta (about sixty kilometers) away from where Thenardier's Army had established its base.

Within the luxurious tent made of a double-weaved silk, Thenardier sat alone. He sat on a chair decorated with many jewels, lost in thought in the silence and darkness. Only his eyes shined white like a starved beast.

*--- There are a few reasons this will become a battle.*

Earlier, he received a message from Bodwin that the King had awoken and he was to head to the Royal Palace and disband his army.

Thenardier killed the messenger and buried him in secrecy. He decided the messenger never arrived.

*--- Regin is probably alive.*

If that was so, Thenardier's fate would be no different from his siblings. He would only meet ruin if he headed to the King's Palace. To overcome the situation, he needed to have either King Faron or Regin die before they met.

*--- Faron is weak, but he will not die today or tomorrow. I can be more certain if I slaughter Regin and Tigrevurmud Vorn.*

It was not without its uncertainties. Even though he still outnumbered the enemy, he did not have his Dragons anymore. Even his right arm, Steid, was gone.

If he returned to Nemetacum, he would be able to recruit more men and bring double what his enemy had.

However, he did not have that room now. He needed to stop Regin before she reached the capital.

There was a plan in which Thenardier could almost absolutely win against Tigre.

He could rush to the Royal City and cause a revolt to kill Tigre and the one who was imitating a member of the Royal Family. He could simply hold the

castle gates and bring it to a siege.

He could use that to buy time while a messenger went to Nemetacum to build a new army. He could employ mercenaries from Sachstein to assassinate Tigre for extra measures.

However, while Thenardier was barricading himself in the King's Capital, Tigre and Regin could dig up the ruins of the [Sacred Caverns of the Royal Palace]<sup>Sangroel</sup> and find proof that she was royalty.

However, even if she could prove her royalty, Regin's influence was still below Thenardier's. Those who doubt the authenticity of her words would hardly be uncommon.

Meanwhile, everyone knew Thenardier's wife was the King's niece. Thenardier himself could continue the bloodline of the royal family.

Ganelon had already left the stage. If Thenardier won this war, all rights would go to him.

If Steid were alive to advise him, Thenardier may have accepted the plan.

However, after thinking that far, Thenardier abandoned the plan. Thenardier recognized there was only one person who could execute his plan perfectly.

In addition, his heart burned intensely to recover from the humiliation of his defeat in the previous battle. Someone strong without ambition would become weak, and, above all, he had lost both his son and his aide to this man. He was determined to kill Tigrevurmud Vorn with his own hands.

The next morning, the Thenardier Army and the [Silver Meteor Army]<sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> took action at the same time. They headed to the south of the King's Capital.

When the day passed, the [Silver Meteor Army]<sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> prepared for rest. Massas presented the state of affairs while studying a map.

"We can't rush, but we need to close the distance, so we should not take too much time."

The distance between the Thenardier Army and the Silver Meteor Army was fifty to sixty belsta. It was a difficult distance to plan an attack.

There was nothing but plains in their surroundings. Since the enemy was sending out their scouts, they could not carelessly approach. If they rushed their soldiers, the enemy could calmly intercept them.

“Aren't our distances to the capital about the same?”

Ellen asked as she looked at the map. Changing the viewpoint, the distance to either the Thenardier Army or the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] was not so different. Before they arrived at the capital, they would certainly come into contact somewhere.

“That's right. Duke Thenardier will likely meet us here.”

Massas pointed to the map with his finger to Mereville Fields near the King's Capital of Nice approximately forty belsta of their current location.

The grounds were smooth, and there were neither hills nor forests. The rivers were distant, and the terrain was difficult to use. The battle would be in favor of those with superior numbers. Furthermore, the woods and hills to the south were conspicuous.

Three days later, the Thenardier Army arrived at Mereville Fields. One step later, the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] set foot there.

Both armies set their camps up within a day and rested in preparation for the decisive battle to come.

Dawn arrived. A cold, fine rain poured down over the Mereville Fields under the cover of thick gray clouds. Though it was not enough to block visibility, the water only served to increase the anxiety of both armies.

However, the General and the Princess could not show such emotions. Both sides promptly completed their formations and faced each other at several hundred alsin apart. The Thenardier Army of sixteen thousand <sup>Unstoppable</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] which had fewer than fifteen thousand.

Both armies had a main force and two wings. The Thenardier Army was strongest in the central unit like a spear, the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] was spread out and stronger in the flank, giving it a concave shape.

“So they really are coming in with the Four Spears Formation.”

Beside the General, Massas stroked his gray beard.

It was a formation built by the Thenardier House. The soldiers were arranged in long, perpendicular lines and mounted an intense rush, attacking in waves.

In the first place, the attack would come from an unknown direction. When the unit was enclosed, it would quickly retreat and others would move in to crush their opponent.

“--- It is fine, Earl Rodant.”

The General turned around with a quiet smile. It was not Tigre, but Regin who led the Silver Meteor Army.

“I am sure Lord Tigrevurmud will be successful.”

Though her voice was in no way forcible, she still quietly dispelled Massas' anxiety. Though she did not find what she wanted in the <sup>Sangroel</sup>

[Sacred Caverns of the Palace], she had managed to quietly mature. Massas smiled as he realized this.

“I suppose so. I should move these old bones as best I can, then.”

Tigre was now in the rear reserve forces. Mira was there as well.

“To the very end, I apologize for putting you in such danger.”

After confirming the condition of his black bow, Tigre looked back at Mira. Mira laughed as she held the Frozen Wave over her shoulder.

“There is no need to worry, since this is just a loan. I will make sure you return it slowly in the future.”

“... And what will the payment be?”

“I will leave that to you. If I like it, then I will accept it. The easiest method would simply be to serve me.”

“That's impossible, since Ellen will be angry.”

If she was truly angry, he would not live for that long. Mira simply shrugged her shoulders and responded with a smile.

"You just need to disguise yourself. You can wear a bearskin and call yourself Urz when you're in front of Eleanora."

She hit a nerve. Tigre stirred his dull red hair to hide his feelings.

The horn marking the start of battle sounded. It blew across the earth wet with rain.

The <sup>Bayard</sup> Red Horse Flag flew on both sides, and the banner of numerous aristocrats colored the hill. The most conspicuous amongst these colors was the <sup>Zirnitra</sup> Black Dragon Flag which did not belong to the country.

The Zhcted Army continued to serve as the right wing of the Silver Meteor Army. The left wing from the Thenardier Army which would confront them already seemed intimidated.

Because it was a battle between two armies of Brune, there was no prelude of arrows. Both armies quickly approached each other on horseback with spear and shield in hand.

The intense sound of their own armor increased their excitement and fear. Though they were driven by the impulse to run away, the existence of their companions surrounding them gave them the courage to endure.

The Thenardier Army raised their voices and spears. The atmosphere expanded quickly. Kicking off the damp grass, the infantry rushed forward, and the moist earth began to tremor.

Some from the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] established a defense with shields while others threw their spears. A shower of spears poured over the Thenardier soldiers, killing many. Many of those who managed to defend with their shields lost balance and fell off their horses, only to be crushed by their companions.

Though the assault from the Thenardier Army weakened, the spears did not stop their advance.

The Thenardier soldiers pierced through the enemy not bearing a shield, while others thrust through the gap between shields to crush the skulls of their opponent. Broken spears, cracked shields, and blood fell to the ground, and many screams rang through the air.

The rain was not enough to wash the blood away.

As blood spread in the battle between the main forces, the right wing of the Thenardier Army and the left wing of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] clashed.

The force composed primarily of Knights steadily closed in with sword and spear while the enemy devoted themselves to defense. They raised their shields, resisting spears and stones thrown from the rear.

On the other side, the Zhcted Army which made the right wing had not advanced too far against Thenardier's left wing, since they had made contact with the enemy later.

Ellen spearheaded the attack as usual, cleaving her way through the enemy with Arifal, her silver-white hair fluttering through the air. The enemy shivered seeing the Vanadis as she advanced in a wake of bloodshed followed by her subordinates brimming with morale.

“Our Lord, our Vanadis is the <sup>Silvfrau</sup> [Wind Princess of the Silver Flash], the <sup>Meltis</sup> [Danseuse of the Sword]! You will never win!”

Even so, the Thenardier soldiers resisted their fears in desperation. From two sides, from three, with swords, shields, and spears, they tried to stop Ellen's advancement as she rushed through on her horse. Even then, Ellen cut through them.

*--- What is it with these guys?*

While her Silver Flash flew to the right and the left, Ellen gave thought. If they were buying time, there were two purposes. Either they were waiting for reinforcements, or they were waiting for the other troops to complete their maneuver.

*--- Are they waiting for the center to win? If it will take too long, I may want to retreat.*

If they retreated here, the main unit's flank would be open, which could easily be attacked, causing their collapse. While pondering on whether or not she should pull back, a soldier came with a report.

“Vanadis-sama, a new enemy has appeared!”

To the right of the Zhcted Army, a new group of infantry suddenly appeared. They charged intensely toward their flank. Though surprised, Ellen collected herself instantly.

*--- Damn Thenardier. He must have planned this beforehand.*

He had likely pulled them away from his main forces the previous night and had them leave the battlefield. He had his main force launch a focused attack against the enemy while a small unit split away to draw her attention and launched a counterattack with his detached unit while his left wing protected the flank.

Even the Zhcted Army could not withstand a violent attack from three directions. Ellen fought bravely as her troops slowly retreated. Even so, more and more troops from Zhcted began to fall.

The Thenardier soldiers, who had built momentum, flocked to Ellen and attacked her. She was a girl who stood out on the battlefield, and she was an enemy Commander. Whether she was captured or her head was taken, there was sure to be a large reward.

Of course, Ellen had no reason to fulfill their desires. She brandished her longsword in all directions, cleaving the enemy's head in two, helmet and all. She cut through spears and sword alike. For every flash of silver, a gust of wind which carried death followed, depriving her enemy of life without mercy.

However, even with their allies' corpses piling up, the Thenardier soldiers showed no fear and continued to charge.

Duke Thenardier promised an enormous reward to whoever took Tigre or Ellen's head. They would be given a title and territory, whether they were a noble or a commoner, and they would have enough money to live their life without working. They would be lavishly entertained and have all the women they could hope for if they managed to capture her alive.

Ellen and Tigre were the core of the [Unstoppable Silver Flow] [Silver Meteor Army]. Though the reward was a major reason for their morale, they had revenge in mind more than anything. They would have revenge on these two for the deaths of Thenardier's son and aide.

--- *This is bad...*

Ellen's breathing was disrupted, and the rain had become stronger. Her argent hair had absorbed the water, causing it to stick to her face. The dust and sweat on her body was washed away, mixing with the river of blood on the ground.

However, what appeared in her head was the progress of the battle.

--- *If the enemy breaks through here, they will hit our main force with their momentum. Our center will collapse.*

She stared at the large flag of the Thenardier Army in the distance.

Suddenly, the flag fell over. It was done by a single arrow.

The man with the flag was killed; the Thenardier Army was wrapped in surprise and agitation. It was the banner held in the center of the Thenardier Army. On the battlefield, in the midst of the whirlpool of chaos, it was virtually an impossible task for a single arrow. It was not a simple skill to do something of that nature.

While the Thenardier Army had stopped its movements, a group of cavalrymen appeared from behind and charged forward fiercely. It was the detached unit of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> ~~Silver Meteor Army~~ led by Tigrevurmud Vorn and Ludmira Lurie.

Mira wielded the Frozen Wave at the forefront and brought one enemy after another to the ground. Behind her, Tigre nocked an arrow to his black bow as she protected him. The wind screamed and Thenardier soldiers cried out as they died, one after another.

One corner of the siege the Thenardier Army built up was destroyed, allowing the Zhcted Army to retreat in a single moment.

“Ellen, Are you safe?”

Tigre rode to her on his horse. Though Mira was pouting in dissatisfaction next to him, she said nothing.

Though Ellen smiled, she was too fatigued to reply immediately. She raised the tip of her sword slightly, and the longsword blew a gentle wind in Tigre's

face.

“... Well, that's how it is.”

After recovering her breath, Ellen finally spoke. It was a difficult answer, so Tigre nodded with a smile.

Because they were convinced of their superiority, the Thenardier soldiers were surprised with the appearance of a new enemy. They were clearly confused as they were pushed back.

Tigre's smile soon became serious as he gazed at Ellen.

“Though it might be a bit harsh to ask you to handle this... Can you still do it?”

“Naturally.”

The Vanadis with silver-white hair smiled fearlessly.

At that time, a change occurred in the center of the battlefield.

Massas and Lim, who were entrusted with command of the left wing, were unable to push back the Four Spears Formation and barely managed not to collapse. In actuality, the enemy's movements were clever; they had invited the Unstoppable Silver Flow [Silver Meteor Army] by retreating many times when their formation was broken, only to attack with fresh troops. This had been repeated numerous times.

Massas and Lim dealt with the new forces every time the Thenardier Army retreated by quickly replacing soldiers with those from the rear, but it was simply a temporary measure.

While it was effective for an enemy against whom they could not deal a fatal blow, the main unit gradually weakened, as if it had a small injury in which the blood would not stop flowing. Because of this unpredictable attack, Tigre's reserve forces needed to intervene, which resulted in him giving aid to Ellen earlier than expected.

The rain had grown stronger in this battle which had lasted two koku.

Lim pushed her wet hair away from her face and spoke to Massas, her face as nondescript as usual.

“... It is difficult to read their movements. This is taking too long.”

“As expected... We still haven't understood it fully.”

Massas stroked his wet beard as he sighed. Fatigue was heavy in their voices.

“His command from the center... It's difficult to tell, but it seems like it is breaking apart... even the formation on the battlefield is.”

Massas laughed as he gave his opinion of Marquis Sonier's command.

The Four Spears Formation was actually a simple plan, if only looking at its structure. Once one of the four spears assaulting the enemy was broken, they would retreat. The enemy would be dragged away to crush them as they retreated, only to be assaulted by another spear. This pattern would repeat itself.

Another variation was to use an injured spear to prevent reinforcements by drawing the enemy away.

Though a plan devoted to defense, each spear would attack as well. They could also throw stones to provoke the enemy, provoking their attack, which would result in spreading the enemy even further.

Lim, naturally, was not acquainted with Marquis Sonier. Despite the report, she had already formed a plan to deal with the Four Spears Formation.

“What would you do?”

“Of course. We will use the bow to crack the spear.”

Lim spoke as she saw the next spear formation heading towards them. Massas issued instructions accordingly. The main unit of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] gradually changed their formation.

Even if the Thenardier soldiers saw the change, they did not stray from the Four Spears Formation. Marquis Sonier ordered an attack with the second spear.

A cry was raised and the muddy water splashed about as the Thenardier soldiers charged forward. The <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] retreated in an orderly fashion, like a tide pulling away from the coast.

However, the Thenardier soldiers did not notice this immediately. Due to Lim and Massas' clever commands, it took the enemy time to notice, and by the time they did, it was already too late.

A battle cry arose from the left and right sides as the Brune soldiers sunk their fangs into the enemy. Their spears gouged flesh between gaps in armor, shields were dropped to the ground, and many fell before they could even take action.

Having lost the momentum of their assault, the Thenardier soldiers were relentlessly bombarded with sword and spear from the left and right.

Marquis Sonier viewed the scene from a distance and ordered a new assault with another spear. With the enemy throwing his men into confusion, he would use his allies to come to their aid.

However, that movement was also read by Lim.

"When the second spear is attacked, the first or third spear will take action, and the fourth will not."

Being told that much, Massas was also able to respond.

"Moving spear four in front of spear two will create a single spear. This makes charging and retreat more difficult."

The soldiers' movements became dull with the muddy earth.

However, Sonier could not handle the Four Spear Formation as well as Steid or Thenardier. The way he used the spears, even as far as the timing of their rushes and retreats, had been read.

Of course, the movements would likely not have been caught by the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flc</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] if not for Lim and Massas, and it would have been impossible to finish off the enemy before support arrived.

In accordance to Lim's expectations, Thenardier Army's first spear rushed forward. Massas took a small unit with him and completely isolated the Thenardier soldiers which had separated from their allies. He encircled them in order to annihilate the unit.

Though Marquis Sonier requested reserve forces from Duke Thenardier, he was refused. Thenardier did not dislike him, but he had already used the

reserve forces to attack the Zhcted Army.

However, while he had done this, the Zhcted Army had not fallen. Rather, the enemy reserves came to their aid and turned the scuffle around.

“But... this is a risky fight.”

Massas muttered to himself as he continued to fight the first and second spear. There were no reserve soldiers, since they were left in the command of Tigre and Mira.

If Massas was slow in grasping the enemy's movements, the Thenardier Army could break through and attack the main unit of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army], causing it to collapse.

The central force of the Thenardier Army had been partially destroyed, and the left wing was weakened. Only the right wing continued to fight bravely. The battle against the Knights of the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] developed into a constant shift between offense and defense.

Though the Knights never charged dramatically, they rarely retreated in the face of an enemy attack. Furthermore, they would occasionally strike a strong counteroffensive.

Due to the brave battle of the Calvados Knights, led by Auguste, and the Perucche Knights, led by Emir, the Thenardier Army were slowly pushed back.

The rain had become more intense; the banners fluttered in the strong winds.

“--- Your Excellency, please run away!”

In the base of the Thenardier Army, one of his aides finally spoke up with a pensive expression.

There were fewer than ten aides and approximately one hundred soldiers around the Duke.

The Thenardier Army was on the verge of collapse due to the Zhcted Army's actions. Though they could hold out, it would only be a matter of time.

He was deep in thought as he looked at his main force. Half his men were surrounded and would soon be crushed, and any soldiers that came to their aid

were skillfully pushed back.

Though the right wing had little movement, it was clear they were not in a superior position. If he pulled even five hundred men from there to guard his base, they would immediately be suppressed.

He could not possibly recover from defeat.

“We can retreat to Nemetacum and gather more than ten thousand men---!”

The man gave his advice, prepared to be cut down. Though such words were for Steid to speak, he was no longer there. Duke Thenardier looked down at his aide who hung his head then looked at the black sky.

--- *If Steid were here...*

If he was alive, victory may have been within his grasp. He held that conviction; however, there was no sense to think such things anymore.

Thenardier already knew it was pointless to escape to Nemetacum at this point in time.

“There is no need to curry my favor. If you wish to surrender, then leave. If you wish to fight, then do so.”

Thenardier spoke with a solemn expression more stern than usual. Both the soldiers and his aides, even those not present, he determined their actions came from their desperation and not their loyalty.

The left wing of the Thenardier Army was finally broken. The soldiers had little energy to move or even lift a sword. The Zhcted Army chased after them; there was not a single soldier who did not bleed.

Even so, they continued to throw their weapons aside and summoned all their energy to run away. Zhcted soldiers broke away from the chase and rushed forward. Duke Thenardier saw many horses heading toward his base.

Wet with rain, the Black <sup>Zirnitra</sup> Dragon Flag waved in the turbulent wind. Beneath it rode the Vanadis with silver-white hair and the Vanadis with blue hair. Leading the charge was a young man with red hair and a black bow in hand.

He had returned from the [Sacred Caverns of the Palace]. Tigrevurmud Vorn and Felix Aaron Thenardier took their stance, facing each other with bow and

sword.

Tigre's face and arms were covered in small wounds, and he was even shedding blood. Thenardier, naturally, was unscathed.

Though Thenardier did not know, it bore a strong resemblance to the spectacle which occurred at the Molsheim Fields where Tigre and Zaien fought one another. Even if he knew, and even if it were not raining, it would be unclear if Duke Thenardier would feel any deep emotions.

For a while, the two men glared at each other in silence. Lim and Ellen, as well as his aides, kept their silence. However, everyone felt it as the tense atmosphere was torn away.

The sound of the rain drowned out the sound of the distant battle. Every person present was wet from head to toe. The soil and grass screamed, as if unable to stand up to the wind and the rain.

“... For what reason did you attack Alsace?”

Tigre quietly asked. Thenardier stared at the young man in surprise. He wondered why he bothered to ask at this point in time.

“If it did not happen, this situation would not be what it is now.”

Most likely, Tigre would have been sold to Muozinel as a prisoner of LeitMeritz, and the Vanadis would not have intervened in the fight between Thenardier and Ganelon.

“Removing Alsace would have prevented Zhcted from invading. Burning the ground and taking the people was the most certain method.”

Thenardier gave thought to the scorched-earth tactic.

By creating a desolate wilderness before Zhcted invaded, he would reduce their morale. Thenardier held no mercy for those who were weak; rather, he was ruthless in his judgment.

“For such a reason...!”

“It was not an incorrect decision.”

Thenardier calmly answered Tigre, who could not suppress his anger. His gaze

moved toward Ellen.

“Across Alsace, on the opposite side of the Vosyes Mountains, there is an opponent with the name of Eleanora Viltaria. Though it was due to the carelessness of the soldiers of Brune, she led five thousand troops and forced twenty-five thousand to retreat in a single night. I was wary that she might invade Brune as she saw the fight between Ganelon and I escalate. If she did that, I would be the first to suffer.”

In fact, the Kingdom of Muozinel had waited for that opportune moment. They waited for Thenardier and Ganelon to move their troops before invading.

Thenardier's Army would not last if it had to deal with the Muozinel Army. Kreshu, the General of the enemy, had skillfully camouflaged his men and waited for an appropriate time to invade. He intended to use Roland as his trump card in the case of an emergency, but he was lost immediately prior to their invasion.

Thenardier continued after returning his eyes to Tigre.

“If I let things go, it was possible Ganelon would have attacked Alsace. Like me, that man has ties to Zhcted. Like you have done, he may have brought the Zhcted Army into the country.”

Ellen and Mira were surprised, though they did not utter a single word.

Though they had asked, they were surprised he had answered in such detail, and they could not suppress a shiver upon hearing of his cruelty. His entire body was filled with power befitting the dignity of a man who had lived twice as long as they had.

Though Tigre was also silent, he was not surprised or frightened.

Thenardier closed his mouth, telling them he had said everything he needed to. Tigre stared at Thenardier and let out a deep, clouded sigh.

“I have heard your story, and I understand your reasons. Like I thought, I cannot forgive you.”

The thing which floated to Tigre's mind was the old man painted in the red of his own blood as it leaked out of his ghastly wound.

The sky had darkened, and the rain and wind became more intense. Tigre's eyes held a desire for revenge. In contrast to his cold body, his heart was hot and his mind was black.

--- The black bow pulsed in anticipation.

"For the death of my son, I, too, cannot permit your existence."

Tigre nocked his arrow as his horse took one step forward. Thenardier drew his sword and rode his horse out of the base.

At that time, Ellen advanced next to Tigre. Expecting a man-to-man fight, everyone started calling out when they witnessed something unexpected.

Ellen, with a sullen face, struck Tigre's back. Tigre's body tilted forward from the unexpected blow.

Everyone gasped. Even Thenardier could not find the meaning of her action. Perhaps only Ellen understood.

--- You've got terrible eyes."

Tigre was surprised and looked at Ellen's face, not understanding her words.

"Don't get drunk, Tigre."

Her bright red eyes and sincere voice penetrated deep into Tigre.

"Go get your revenge, but don't revel in it. That is not your only weapon."

Though Tigre did not respond, Ellen's words reached him. The darkness in his eyes began to recede, and the light slowly returned. Though the darkness had not fully faded, it was no longer enough to envelop his heart.

The black light spreading throughout the bow in Tigre's hands disappeared without anyone noticing. In this rain, there was not a single person who saw the light.

Tigre removed his gaze from Ellen and looked at Thenardier.

"Thank you."

*I am grateful to have met you.*

After muttering those words to himself, his will to fight returned to his dark

eyes.

“--- I'm off.”

He spoke quickly. This time, Ellen did not stop him; however, she strongly gripped the hilt of her sword, praying for Tigre's victory.

*--- I will defeat Duke Thenardier.*

This man was a menace to the peace of Alsace, and he was the cause of this war. Right here, right now, he would fall.

Tigre removed the quiver hung on his saddle and dropped it, and all the arrows within, to the ground. Thenardier looked at him with a sharp expression.

“You will fight me with a single arrow?”

“I can see with my own eyes that there would not be enough time to nock a second arrow. Besides, it would only weaken my resolve.”

“In this rain and wind? Are you crazy...?”

“It is not my only disadvantage.”

The rain lowered his body temperature, and his clothes were stuck to his skin. His hair was heavy and uncomfortable and impaired his vision. Not only could the bow easily slip from his grasp, the arrow would not fly straight if it flew into the wind.

“--- Very well.”

The two naturally made their horses advance, separated by a distance of thirty alsin.

Bow and sword – it was a strange duel. Ellen stared with bated breath. Mira, the soldiers of Zhcted, and the Thenardier Army all watched the scene before them.

It was a strife born of personal hatred, a battle separate from war.

Thenardier readied his sword and grasped the damp reins. Tigre gazed at his enemy with his bow bent and at the ready as he waited for his opponent.

There would be no second chance; there was only one shot. Tigre was at a heavy disadvantage. Even with a distance of thirty alsin, Thenardier was on

horseback. Even if he could attack first, Thenardier's blade only needed to reach Tigre's neck.

Still, the speed of an arrow at short distances was a frightening thing.

Unlike the sword whose orbit formed a line, the arrow was a single point. Even with Tigre's archery skill, one mistake in his fingers' movements would result in his death.

The two stood tense; more than a count of ten had passed without either moving. The rain showed no signs of becoming weak, and the wind continued to blow harshly.

The wind changed to Thenardier's advantage. It was a headwind for Tigre. The moment he felt this change, Thenardier kicked his horse's belly and let out a roar. The four hooves kicked up the mud as he quickly reduced the distance of thirty alsin.

He aimed in a single moment and began to release his arrow. Thenardier judged in an instant that it would not hit.

--- *Goddess of Storms...*

He chanted the name of the Goddess in his mind. The face of the girl with silver-white hair floated to his mind.

He had cut the distance to twenty alsin. At that time, the arrow separated from Tigre's hand.

The bowstring moved forward, propelling the arrow. The arrow moved neither early nor late. The speed and aim was perfect.

It hit him right between the eyes. Thenardier's large frame separated from the horse, flying through the air.

--- Everything happened in a moment.

The moment Tigre shot his arrow, Thenardier brandished his sword. It was a frightening reaction, as if he had caught the very sound of the trembling bowstring.

The arc of the sword was not simple. He had clenched his dark gray blade and

accurately caught the movements of the arrow. Thenardier was sure of his victory.

However, at the moment before he smashed the arrow to pieces, the wind blew. It differed from the raging gale a moment before; it was a breeze he would not notice, even if it touched his skin.

The arrow's trajectory changed, passing right beside the blade.

The arrow pierced the Duke's head and buried itself halfway through. The Duke was thrown off his horse; his eyes were opened wide as he toppled to the ground on his back.

Tigre's fingers had not moved from the moment he released the arrow. He was still in shooting position. He could feel the vibration of the bowstring and the cold sweat dripping down his face.

After a long, long silence, Tigre dismounted his horse and walked to Thenardier. The Duke was still breathing. The rain immediately washed away the tide of blood from the fresh arrow wound. Thenardier's eyes gazed at Tigre, and his lips moved.

“Brune... is...”

His words ended there. His eyes were hollow and he never uttered another word again.

Felix Aaron Thenardier gasped his last breath in Mereville Fields.

“... That wind just now, was it you?”

After confirming the duel had finished, Ellen whispered at the longsword at her waist.

Tigre's arrow moved just before it hit Thenardier's sword. Ellen had not overlooked this.

Though it may have been a coincidence, she instinctively suspected her important partner. Arifal let out a light wind denying her words.

“... I see.”

The Dragon Wind Tool does not lie to its master.

Tigre won by his own strength. The wind was simply his ally.

Tigre returned slowly and was greeted by Ellen with a brilliant smile. No words could be said to describe her excitement.

With the death of Duke Thenardier, the morale of the soldiers serving him shattered. Regin called for their surrender and had her soldiers move back. The soldiers of the Thenardier Army threw their arms away, one after another.

The fight at Mereville had finally ended.

Tigre's battle which began in LeitMeritz had finally come to a conclusion.

# Epilogue

At the northern end of Brune Kingdom, in a port city not yet touched by spring, there were two men.

They were wrapped in slightly soiled travel wear. One man was short in stature like a child and wore a hat on his head which grew no hair. The other was tall and was naturally clothed in a noble atmosphere.

They were Ganelon and Greast. After setting fire to Artishem, the two had hidden in a nameless port town. After receiving certain information, they decided to leave Brune.

As they stared idly at ships in the distance moving toward Zhcted Kingdom, they were called to from behind. It was a woman.

When they looked back, they saw a woman in a dress who was clearly out of place for the small port town. She was around 20 years old and had blue-black hair down to her waist. Her snow-white dress was decorated with roses.

Though her skin was a pale white, giving her a sickly impression, the large scythe in her hand strongly countered it.

“I apologize for having kept you waiting, Duke Ganelon, Marquis Greast.”

“It has been a long time, Lord Glinka Estes.”

The beautiful woman bowed. Ganelon returned her greeting with a smile. The woman standing before them was the Shervid

[Illusionary Princess of the Hollow Shadow], the Vanadis Valentina Glinka Estes.

“Let us go. Though winter still lingers in Zhcted, you will be safe.”

Valentina spoke as she smiled radiantly at the two.

Tigrevurmud Vorn passed beneath the gates of the King's Capital of Nice as a hero and savior of the country. It was nearly ten days since the end of the Battle of Mereville.

His garb, of course, were not his normal leather armor and hempen clothes. He wore a jet-black silk coat with silver cuffs and a white mantle. It was prepared quickly by the Royal Palace.

Teita and Regin both said "It suits you" the evening before.

Ellen, Mira, and Massas smiled bitterly. Lim looked at him as if troubled. Rurick said "It was quickly constructed, after all," and Gerard commented that they gave off the impression of being "a waste of money."

They continued down the road from the southern gate to the Royal Palace, following after a marching band. Carriages laden with various flags and armor collected from the battle with the Muozinel Army followed behind.

The trumpet was a performance reserved for victory against a foreign enemy. It was formally an honor praising his service of defeating the Muozinel Army.

Finally, Tigre rode in on a carriage slowly pulled by four horses.

Along both sides of the street, residents of the Royal Capital surged to see the hero who had saved the country. They threw flowers and enthusiastic shouts of joy. It was a celebration of Tigre's victory as well as a celebration for the return of peace to the country.

Next to Tigre was Regin in formal attire. She wore a white dress decorated with pearls along her neckline and cuffs. Beside her, Teita sat as the lady-in-waiting.

"Lord Tigrevurmud."

As Regin whispered to Tigre, his entire body went stiff with tension. She was a beautiful woman wrapped in a dazzling dress. It was impossible for Tigre to look directly at her.

"Really, thank you so much. I owe you for all you have done."

No. Tigre could not think of words to respond with. Teita pouted further down.

Following behind the three were Ellen and Mira. The two wore a mantle over their battle uniform out of courtesy which highlighted their normal dignity. They were bathed in applause, regardless of gender.

Though the two advanced on horseback with resolute attitudes, they were secretly smoldering in discontent. They had wanted to sit next to Tigre, and, if possible, not in their battle uniforms.

Regarding their dissatisfaction, Tigre persuaded Ellen to endure, since they would return to LeitMeritz afterward. He said the same to Mira, though replacing LeitMeritz with Zhcted.

Behind the Vanadis were Lim and Massas.

Reading their minds from behind, Lim let out a small sigh. Massas noticed her and smiled sympathetically.

Finally, the Knights and well known aristocrats with distinguished military services and the brave men that served them appeared. Those who cooperated with Tigre, such as Rurick, Gerard, and Augre, were amongst them.

Pierre Bodwin returned to the King's Capital of Nice the day after Tigre had killed Duke Thenardier on the battlefield. The next day, he cleaned off his uniform and reported the issues regarding Tigre and Regin to King Faron.

The following day, King Faron officially recognized Regin as Princess. He also ordered for a celebration recognizing Tigre's actions be held. The cat-faced Prime Minister quickly sent a message to the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army].

Upon hearing this, Tigre and the others were stunned. As for Massas, he looked petrified with terror.

However, they could not simply remain in stunned silence. While the King and Bodwin were preparing the King's Capital to accept the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army], Tigre and the others were busy giving rewards to the subordinates. Those who surrendered completed the cleaning of the battlefield and burial of the dead.

Finally, the <sup>Unstoppable Silver Flow</sup> [Silver Meteor Army] rushed to the Royal Capital and were greeted with a triumphant celebration.

Since the King was still ill, Bodwin took care of the celebration.

In the temple on Ruberon Mountain, Tigre reported his victory to the Pantheon of Gods and the founder of the nation, King Charles. He expressed his gratitude for their divine protection. Afterward, Bodwin praised Tigre and the others for their distinguished services in the banquet hall of the Royal Palace, where every person was promised a reward. Once the ceremony ended, the venue had turned into a party.

However, some people, including Tigre, did not participate in the feast. They were invited to a certain room by Bodwin.

After a half koku, Tigre stood before the King's ward. Regin, Ellen, Mira, Lim, and Massas stood alongside Tigre. Bodwin stood before the door and reported in a solemn voice.

"His Majesty's condition is still poor. Also, a messenger from another country has already arrived. Please do not place too much stress on him."

Bodwin reverently opened the door. Tigre set foot inside the ward.

One man was in the center of the large room. He rose from his bed when he saw Tigre and the others. Standing near him was a woman with wavy golden hair.

"... Sophie?"

Ellen looked at her in surprise. Lim, Mira, and Tigre also looked at her in amazement. Though Massas was surprised, the old Earl's body first paid homage to the King as his vassal. Tigre quickly followed shortly after.

Sophie's expression, her smile which seemed eternal, betrayed a moment of sadness. The reason was immediately apparent.

The King nodded slowly toward the cat-faced Prime Minister. Bodwin guided Tigre and the others to the foot of the bed.

*--- Your Majesty...?*

Though he was unable to say a word, Tigre could not hide his shock and dismay as he walked along the foot of the bed.

King Faron was 41 years old. He was one year younger than Duke Thenardier whom Tigre had seen on the battlefield.

However, the man before them had little meat on his body. His skin sagged all over, and his hair was dyed gray. It was not just an illness.

It was as if his body was boiled and he was on the brink of death. It was a mystery as to how he remained conscious.

“Father...”

The voice full of grief came from Regin. Though they had finally reunited after half a year, her father had completely changed.

“Father... Why, why are you like this?”

She could not believe her eyes. Regin's voice trembled and her eyes were wide open.

The King's condition was poor. Massas had heard this from Bodwin.

However, the King before their eyes was beyond their imagination. Though Tigre and Ellen were clearly shocked, the impact was even greater for Regin, his biological daughter.

“... Let Bodwin tell you of the circumstances.”

A withered voice leaked from the King. His delicate neck turned. Faron looked at Regin first.

“I am sorry, Regin. I did not know whether I should act as a father or a King.”

Regin could barely suppress her turbulent emotions. She gently grasped her father's hand and was horrified by how cold and thin it had become. Her father, Faron, was nothing but skin and bones. With only a little pressure, it felt as if his hands would break.

Faron spoke haltingly, explaining why he had raised Regin as a prince.

The King loved Regin's mother, the former Queen. She died soon after giving birth to Regin. Faron had hoped to do something for her.

“I was young at the time. I thought I could defend your honor as well as Nina's...”

Nina was the name of Regin's mother. At the age of 25, Faron strongly believed in his own potential

Nina gave birth only to Regin before she died. If he had left things as they were, she would receive humiliating treatment, since the Queen was only able to give birth to a Princess. The young Faron could not endure.

"And to deal with Thenardier and Ganelon... a Prince was necessary."

The King wished to bestow an honor on Regin for her first campaign, and, one day, he would bring her to a monastery. Though unknown to everyone here, it was almost the exact thing Ganelon had told to Greast in Artishem before.

Faron's eyes moved from his daughter to Tigre.

"So you are Vorn..."

Tigre bent to his knees as the King spoke with a trembling voice.

"You have taken upon yourself the duties that were originally mine to do, and I have imposed upon all of you... You have even brought it to an end. How may I reward you? Whether it is a title or territory, say what you wish for."

Tigre did not answer at once. He did not fight to obtain such things. There was only one thing he wished to say when he met the King.

*Why did you leave Duke Ganelon and Duke Thenardier to do as they please?*

If they had been subjugated early on, many people would still remain alive. He wanted to shout; Batran may have lived his life peacefully in Alsace.

However, he could not give voice to his emotions after seeing the dying King.

"Thank you for your generous words. I do not desire a title, territory, or an official rank. However, if you will excuse me... I wish to ask you something, Your Majesty."

Tigre, little by little, explained the events which had occurred from the Battle of Dinant to the present day. He spoke briefly due to the King's condition.

The King listened in silence. He waved away Bodwin, who tried to tell him to rest, and continued listening to the story.

When Tigre finished speaking, Tigre straightened his breathing and stood at

the ready.

“I wish for---”

Brune Kingdom will show its appreciation to the Kingdom of Zhcted for its cooperation, paying fifty thousand gold pieces as a reward for their aid.

Furthermore, Brune Kingdom shall pay all expenses incurred by Zhcted Kingdom in the war.

Brune Kingdom will relinquish the lands of Agnes to Zhcted Kingdom.

Finally, Brune Kingdom is to propose a mutual non-aggression pact for three years.

These four provisions were exchanged between Brune Kingdom and Zhcted Kingdom.

Though he did not immediately sign the mutual non-aggression pact, since it required the approval of the King of Zhcted, the other three were promptly settled between Sophie and Faron. If it were done by Ellen and Mira, it would not have resolved as quickly due to a problem of authority.

“Lord Sophia. I hope you can give the King of Zhcted my greetings as well.”

Faron spoke to Sophie in a feeble voice. After releasing the territory, he added the message, [Faron has approved of Regin as heir to the throne].

That is, so long as Regin was not recognized as the next ruler of Brune, the cessation of territory to Zhcted would be invalidated during the intermittent period. Faron would use the country known as Zhcted to support Regin's ascension to the throne. Naturally, he would not last for much longer.

“Regin, Your Highness, I shall deliver his words to our King.”

Sophie answered in this manner, formally accepting Regin as a representative of Zhcted Kingdom.

Though the cessation of Agnes was a severe blow, it was not simply a loss for Brune. With this, Muozinel Kingdom could not attack Brune; on the other hand, it was now possible to reach Zhcted through the southern seas.

Regin was officially recognized as Princess and was determined as the King's next of kin.

The reason Faron celebrated Tigre's victory was, of course, to repay Tigre and the others. With the disappearance of the most powerful aristocrats, the majority of nobles were thrown into confusion over the succession. To say it poorly, he wanted to take advantage of the confusion to divert their attention.

He would say Regin was raised as Prince due to an [Oracle's Divination].

When all was said and done, Faron called to Tigre.

"Earl Vorn. There is one thing I wish to present to you..."

Though curious, Tigre gave his gratitude.

"I wish to grant you the title, [Knight of the Moonlight]."

In this case, Knight referred to a brave hero. Hearing the title [Knight of the Moonlight], Bodwin shook slightly, though none noticed.

"You have saved my daughter and repelled a foreign enemy. With a single bow, you returned peace to these lands. Please accept it."

Tigre accepted it gratefully. Ellen and the others tapped his shoulder and gave their blessings. After a formal congratulatory address, Bodwin thought of the King's intent.

He knew [Knight of the Moonlight] was a title which existed since ancient times. He also knew it was once a far more distinguished title than any other.

However, Bodwin knew. There was only one person in the past who was granted the title. He later married the daughter of the King who bestowed the title upon him and became the next King.

Bodwin did not say this, however. He judged the King did not wish for him to say it.

Regarding Alsace, it settled down after the decision was made that it would be jointly controlled by Princess Regin and Eleanora of LeitMeritz. It was not a contract between nations, but between a single noblewoman and the Princess. Since it was not relinquished in the provisions, it acted as an emphasis on

Regin's good will.

"As for the development of the path through Vosyes, I will ask you to take care of it."

Ellen confirmed the contract and smiled happily; her wish was granted. On the other hand, Regin had a sullen expression.

"This contract, this non-aggression pact between Brune and Zhcted, it will be held until the end."

"I will not forget. Also... In three years, you will return Lord Tigrevurmud."

"Don't use such poor language when you're negotiating a peace treaty aimed toward friendship. Let me keep Tigre as part of our friendship."

Tigre's custody was moving between the two without the consent of the person in question.

Tigre's contract as a prisoner of war was still valid, but Brune could not allow its hero and savior who received a title to be unreleased.

And so, Ellen made a proposal in a deliberately gentle manner.

I will keep him in LeitMeritz for three years.

Once three years pass, I will annul his contract as a prisoner of war.

She had her own expectations, of course. Ellen had not decided how to use Tigre in the future. The Vanadis with silver-white hair decided to use this contract to keep him nearby.

Also, she had confidence she could lure him to her side in the next three years.

--- *In three years, if Tigre wishes to remain by my side, whatever Regin says will be useless.*

Regin, though dissatisfied, accepted the conditions.

One reason was because there were probably many people in Brune who held grudges and hostility toward Tigre. Those who worked beneath Duke Thenardier, and others who had disliked him before, they would try to eliminate Tigre no matter the means.

At present, Regin lacked the ability to protect Tigre from those people.

Moreover, with Tigre in Zhcted, she could show her ties with Zhcted to other nations. Regin herself had many enemies, and, though she could not necessarily count on Zhcted, it was still a precious ally.

The hustle and bustle of a feast was present both inside and outside the Royal Palace. Tigre borrowed a room and gathered his luggage.

He had bitter memories of the past and was not fond of the Royal Palace, and, since he was going to Zhcted, he did not want to deal with the trouble of explaining his situation.

*--- Ah, I wish I could eat the dishes in the Royal Palace...*

When he thought such things, a knock sounded from the door. Thinking it was Teita, Tigre opened the door.

It was not Teita, but the three Vanadis.

“Lord Tigrevurmud, thank you for your hard work.”

Sophie gave words of appreciation and smiled at him. As if it were natural, she gently but closely embraced Tigre. He could not speak as she had buried his face into her rich, soft chest. While standing in place, his face dyed crimson.

“H, hey, Sophie?”

“So, so suddenly...”

Ellen and Mira stared wide eyed with cramped faces as they watched the abrupt behavior of their friend. Sophie released Tigre and stuck out her tongue before bowing. Her wavy, golden hair shook.

“I apologize. It has been such a long time.”

Of course, that was not the only reason. She wanted to know how Tigre's relationship with her friend with silver-white hair had developed. However, the results were unexpected.

*--- Oh my, Ellen, it seems you are more devoted to this boy than before. And surely Mira showed a reaction as well... It seems the future will be quite*

*interesting.*

Sophie's interest in Tigre increased even more at this moment.

Ellen had a disappointed expression but quickly pulled herself back together and smiled. The boy with dull red hair shook his head to clear his mind.

“... We're going back, Tigre.”

Tigre turned to Ellen with a smile and nodded.

--- Several days after the celebration, King Faron quietly took his final breath.



A girl with silver-white hair stared at a document in interest.

“--- So Tigre hasn't come back yet.”

Lim, who was beside her helping with political affairs, answered with her head slightly cocked.

“He went to the mountains four days ago. He should return today or tomorrow.”

*Did you need him?* The expressionless girl asked with her gaze. Ellen nodded and glanced out the window as she took the papers Lim had passed her.

In the brilliant sunlight of summer above Zhcted, a shadow was drawn across the floor.

“That guy – I'm having him go to Asvarre.”

It had been half a year since Tigre began living in LeitMeritz.

In these foreign lands, a new battle was about to begin.